

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents several sections. Firstly, the background is explained as a drive for conducting this study. Then, research questions and aims are proposed to address the research issues. The scope and limitation of this study are also drawn in this chapter. The section proceeds to research significance of the study. Sequentially, the clarification of terms used in this study is outlined. Briefly, the thesis organization is described. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter is depicted.

#### 1.1. Background of the Study

For more than a year, the outbreak of Covid-19 has changed all life aspects; one of them is education. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture released an educational policy called the emergency curriculum (MOEC, 2020a) that all education levels' teaching and learning processes were shifted from traditional to online. Regarding this policy, EFL teachers must conduct online learning using technology-based education without exceptions (MOEC, 2020b; 2020c). Although EFL teachers were mandated to obey the Indonesian emergency curriculum, not all of them could maximize the technology features creatively because of less preparation (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020), and they struggled with unfamiliar learning platforms (Nugroho & Haghegh, 2021). Also, teachers and students encountered the unavailability of quotas, stable internet connection, and mobile phone in online learning (Cahyadi et al., 2021; Holisoh & Fitriani, 2020).

Accordingly, the Ministry of Education and Culture informed in the socialization of the emergency curriculum that there are two reasons this curriculum is needed:

*Kesehatan dan keselamatan peserta didik, pendidik, tenaga kependidikan, keluarga, dan masyarakat merupakan prioritas utama dalam menetapkan kebijakan pembelajaran; dan tumbuh kembang peserta didik dan kondisi psikososial juga menjadi pertimbangan dalam pemenuhan layanan pendidikan selama masa pandemi COVID-19.*

[The health and safety of students, educators, education staff, families and communities are a top priority in setting learning policies; besides, student growth and development and psychosocial conditions are also a

consideration in fulfilling education services during the COVID-19 pandemic.]

It is mentioned in the official letter No. 719/P/2020 about the emergency curriculum (MOEC, 2020a) that:

*Guru tidak lagi diharuskan untuk memenuhi beban kerja 24 jam tatap muka dalam satu minggu.*

[Teachers are no longer required to fulfil a workload of 24 face-to-face hours in one week.]

Based on those policies, EFL teachers were not required to complete students' competencies because of the importance of maintaining students' psychological conditions during the pandemic. This situation impacted EFL teachers' grade decision-making, which recent studies have not discovered.

Unlike online learning before the pandemic or typical online language teaching (OLT), online learning in emergency remote language teaching (ERLT) takes place in an urgent and unexpected situation without teachers or stakeholders having a well-preparation for the quality of learning design (Hodges et al., 2020; Kusumastuti, 2020). During ERLT, teachers felt it challenging to maximize students' multi-dimensions engagement: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Notably, online learning during the pandemic triggered mental issues such as frustration, anxiety (C. T. Hapsari, 2021), confusion, and boredom (Dewi & Wajdi, 2021). Further, this ERLT caused a decline in students' motivation and engagement in the learning process (F. I. Hapsari, 2020; Nugroho & Haghegh, 2021) and cognitive abilities (Lase et al., 2021). It worsened because students lacked digital literacy in understanding teachers' instructions (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020).

Regarding formative and summative assessments, which happen in various learning environments, including online learning (Koç et al., 2015), teachers should consider how they score and grade the students as it is essential for effective teaching (Karagül et al., 2017). Moreover, in grade decision-making, there are several factors, such as academic and non-academic records (Lawrence, Rober, Cross, and Frary, 1996; McMillan, Myran, and Workman, 2002), cognitive and non-cognitive performances (Brookhart, 2016) or product and process factors (Guskey, 1996, in Guskey & Link, 2019), besides teachers' internal (Cheng & Sun,

2015) and external factors (McMillan & Nash, 2000; see Cheng & Sun, 2015; Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010). The combination of those factors is called hodgepodge grading (McMillan & Workman, 1998).

In the Indonesian context, some studies on grade decision-making have been carried out in face-to-face (F2F) English language teaching before the pandemic (Arrafii, 2020; Isnawati & Saukah, 2017; Widiastuti, 2018; Zulaiha, 2017). The study carried out by Arrafii (2020) reveals that EFL secondary school teachers did grade inflation due to some reasons: internal and external pressures, prioritizing students' graduation, challenging and demanding assessment tasks mentioned in the basic competencies of the national curriculum, a standardized online electronic application program for entering final scores, and students' future trajectories. In the online learning context, during the pandemic, a recent study conducted by Karadag (2021) reported the pandemic situation caused grade inflation in higher education, which is 9.21%, the highest ever reported in the literature because educators increased grades as compensation for challenges and problems during the pandemic. Unfortunately, Karadag did not cover grade decision-making in his study and only addressed higher education grading issues. These studies show that the combination of grade factors in grade decision-making done by Indonesian EFL secondary schools in traditional settings was identified as grade inflation. Furthermore, in the online learning setting during the pandemic, the case of grade inflation increased in the higher education context.

Research about grade inflation has been probed by many researchers more than a decade ago in schools and higher education (Arrafii, 2020; Brookhart, 1998; Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Guskey & Link, 2019; Karadag, 2021; McMillan & Nash, 2000; Yesbeck, 2011; Zulaiha et al., 2020). However, grade inflation still arises a debate within several perspectives. First, it comes from Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) that although the hodgepodge grading, the combination of grade factors, potentially leads to grade inflation (Arrafii, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019; Yesbeck, 2011), it is acceptable when teachers can transform the hodgepodge grading into observable and measurable evidence in their assessment. Second, even though teachers take into account internal factors, such as teachers' knowledge, assessment

training, beliefs, expectations, and values about their teaching and learning, eventually teachers must obey top-down regulations from the curriculum, regional to school policies (Arrafii, 2020), particularly to help students pass the minimum mastery criteria (KKM) in final grade reports. Second, looking at the research findings on ERLT that have been aforementioned, teachers, students, and stakeholders encountered challenges and difficulties for conducting an ideal teaching and learning English due to online learning in the pandemic. If students in higher education were still bearable with difficulties and challenges in online learning during the pandemic, secondary school students would struggle more to cope with the problems and challenges of online learning during the pandemic. Further, teachers struggled to assess students' cognitive, affective, and skill domains since a decline in students' motivation, engagement, and cognitive abilities happened in online learning during the pandemic. Accordingly, this unideal teaching and learning in online learning during the pandemic pedagogically impacted EFL teachers in grade decision-making and morally justified grade inflation (Johnston, 2008).

Therefore, to address the issues above and to fill the gap, this study investigated grade factors taken into account by EFL secondary school teachers in grade decision-making in online learning during the pandemic. Further, this study aims to explore how they provided measurable and observable evidence in their assessment. Besides, this study attempts to identify the occurrence of grade inflation in grading considerations of EFL secondary school teachers in emergency remote teaching during the pandemic and study how they morally justify it. Because this issue is recent and most of Indonesia's relevant studies are from before the pandemic, conducting this study on grade decision-making and grade inflation by EFL teachers in secondary schools with their moral justifications is crucial. This study gives theoretical, practical, and policy significance to English teachers, schools, experts, and stakeholders in assessment standards and language testing and assessment.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

Based on the research gap explained above, here are the research questions that the researcher attempts to discover:

- a. What factors do EFL secondary school teachers consider in grade decision-making in online learning during the pandemic?
- b. How do they provide measurable and observable evidence in their assessments?
- c. What grading considerations and moral justifications are taken by EFL secondary school teachers in relation to their grade inflation in online learning during the pandemic?

## **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to address the research questions above. The first aim is to investigate grade decision-making factors that EFL secondary school teachers consider in online learning during the pandemic and describe how they provide measurable and observable evidence in their assessments. Second, this study was conducted to identify grade decision-making by EFL secondary school teachers that led to grade inflation and study their moral justifications.

## **1.4. Scope and Limitation of the Study**

Among various assessment activities, this current study concerns grading as a research topic, particularly investigating EFL teachers' grade decision-making and grade inflation in online learning during the pandemic. The scope of this study covers all secondary education levels from junior to senior high schools and from public to private schools in Indonesia, such as SMP, MTs, SMA, MA, and SMK. However, this study is context-bounded in online learning during the pandemic situation. Thus, only EFL teachers who ever conducted online, hybrid, or blended learning during the pandemic were potential participants in this study.

## **1.5. Significance of the Study**

This study is significant from theoretical, practical, and policy perspectives. First, theoretically, this study enriches language assessment literature. Secondly, this study is useful for EFL secondary school teachers to assign students grades in online learning. Lastly, this study's findings give Indonesian policymakers and educators recommendations for implementing curriculum assessment and educational regulations in online learning. Also, it provides a reference for policymakers to evaluate the existing educational policies in schools or local regulations on online learning during the pandemic.

## 1.6. Clarification of Terms

The main underlying terms of this study are grade factors and inflation. Then, the context of this study involves EFL teachers in secondary schools within online learning during the pandemic. The following paragraphs will be explained further.

### 1.6.1. Grade Decision-making

Grade decision-making refers to teachers' grading activities when they take into account several factors, such as their internal (Cheng & Sun, 2015; Widiastuti, 2018) and external factors (McMillan & Nash, 2000; see also Cheng & Sun, 2015; Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010), student's academic and non-academic records (Lawrence, Rober, Cross, and Frary, 1996; McMillan, Myran, and Workman, 2002), cognitive and non-cognitive performances (Brookhart, 2016; Arrafii, 2020), or product and process factors (Guskey, 1996, in Guskey & Link, 2019), and the combination of all those factors (McMillan & Workman, 1998; McMillan & Nash, 2000). In this study, the activities of grade decision-making were conducted by Indonesian EFL secondary school teachers in online learning during the pandemic across junior, senior, and vocational education levels, whether from private or public schools. Since the grade decision-making involves formative and summative assessments, including middle and final tests or *Penilaian Tengah Semester (PTS)*

and *Penilaian Akhir Semester (PAS)*, teachers in this study conducted online learning with at least one semester in any grade and any teaching topic.

#### 1.6.2. Grade Inflation

Grade inflation refers to a situation when teachers perform hodgepodge grading practices, a combination of teachers' internal and external factors, students' non-academic, non-cognitive, or process factors, and academic, cognitive, or product factors (Arrafii, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2019; McMillan & Workman, 1998; McMillan & Nash, 2000; Yesbeck, 2011) without they provide measurable and observable assessment evidence (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). In this study, grade inflation happens not only when EFL secondary school teachers performed hodgepodge grading and could provide measurable and observable evidence in their assessment but also when they encountered unideal grade decision-making in online learning during the pandemic. Also, due to the pandemic, teachers' good nature and empathy (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010) assigned students higher grades than the reality, but their abilities do not (Bejar and Blew, 1981, cited in Camara et al., 2003).

#### 1.6.3. Moral Justification of Grade Inflation

The framework of moral justifications is based on the morality of testing and assessment in English Language Teaching (Johnston, 2008). In this study, moral justification regards the paradoxes of subjectivity and necessary evil and several values in classroom assessment, such as teacher-student relation, the indirect relationship between students' assessment results and actual knowledge, and assessment beyond language referring to attitude domains. As long as EFL secondary schools considered the paradoxes and upheld values in grade decision-making, their grade inflation was morally justified.

#### 1.6.4. EFL Teachers in Secondary Schools

Indonesian EFL teachers refer to those who have duties for teaching English as a foreign language at secondary school levels. In Indonesia, secondary schools

cover junior, senior, and vocational high schools, either private or public education. In this study, 235 EFL secondary school teachers come from almost all of Indonesia islands, such as Jawa, Sumatera, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, across provinces with various and different numbers in each province. Then, specifically, five selected participants of EFL secondary school teachers in this study are from Islamic private junior high school, public junior high school, Islamic private senior high school, public senior high school, and public vocational school.

#### 1.6.5. Online Learning during The Pandemic

In this study, online learning during the pandemic is the situated situation of distance learning, blended learning, and E-learning using technology-based education, such as email, digital platforms, social networking sites, learning management systems (LMS), discussion boards, video conferences, social media, and others following the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) curriculum launched by The Ministry of Culture and Education (MOEC, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c) and a definition coined by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020).

### 1.7. Thesis Organization

This thesis is arranged into five chapters. The first chapter includes the study's background, research questions, purposes, significance, scope, and terms. After that, the second chapter focuses on a literature review containing theoretical foundations and previous related studies. The third chapter discusses the research methodology that describes the research design, site and participants, data collection, and data analysis. The fourth chapter explores the findings and discussion of this study. Finally, the last chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations of this study.

### 1.8. Concluding Remark

This chapter describes the background, research questions, objectives, scope and limitation, and significance of this study sequentially. Then, this chapter defines



the terms used in this study, followed by how this thesis is organized. In the next chapter, there will be discussions about theoretical frameworks and previous studies used in this study.