

A comparative study of in-service and pre-service teachers' beliefs about the urgency of compulsory English in Indonesian primary schools within the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

The introduction of compulsory English in Indonesian primary schools has become an important issue in English language education. Although early English learning is widely supported, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the government's 2027 mandate raises questions about school readiness and teacher preparedness. This study compares the beliefs of in-service and pre-service teachers regarding the urgency of English as a compulsory subject in primary schools and examines how these beliefs relate to policy implementation, professional readiness, and curriculum interpretation. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved ten purposively selected participants in Jambi Province, Indonesia: five in-service teachers and five pre-service teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives and analysed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged. First, both groups strongly affirmed the urgency of early English learning, citing digital exposure, the developmental advantages of early language learning, and the prevention of future academic gaps. Second, although participants supported the 2027 compulsory English policy, they expressed concerns about unequal school readiness, teacher shortages, and limited educational resources, particularly in rural areas. Third, both groups acknowledged gaps in professional readiness; however, teachers emphasized pedagogical and institutional challenges, whereas pre-service teachers highlighted limited confidence and insufficient preparation for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Overall, both groups supported compulsory English in primary schools but expressed concerns about school readiness, teacher competence, and unequal educational resources, indicating that successful implementation requires comprehensive institutional support.

Keywords: English urgency; Merdeka Curriculum; primary schools; teacher beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Recent curriculum reforms have renewed attention to English at the primary school level in Indonesia. Although English was reduced to a local content subject under the 2013 Curriculum, its contribution to early language

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development, communicative competence, and readiness for subsequent English learning remains widely recognised (Pardede, 2020; Rosfiani et al., 2022). As a result, the urgency of English instruction in primary schools has become an increasingly important topic in educational discourse.

The Merdeka Curriculum grants schools greater autonomy in curriculum design, including the option to offer English at the primary level. This flexibility is reinforced by a national policy mandating English as a compulsory subject beginning in the 2027/2028 academic year (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2024)(Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2024). However, effective implementation depends on teachers' beliefs, professional readiness, and institutional support. Previous studies show that disparities in educational resources, professional development, and institutional support significantly influence teachers' responses to curriculum reforms (Hasudungan et al., 2024; Kaluge & Usmi, 2024) , highlighting that successful implementation relies not only on policy design but also on teachers' perceptions and responses to educational change.

Building on this perspective, this study adopts Borg's (2003) framework of teachers' beliefs as its primary theoretical lens. Borg conceptualizes teachers' beliefs as teachers' personal knowledge, assumptions, attitudes, and experiences that shape how they interpret curriculum reforms and make instructional decisions. Rather than implementing policies mechanically, teachers respond to educational change through their professional experiences, confidence, and contextual realities. Accordingly, teachers' beliefs mediate curriculum implementation and instructional practice and may vary according to teaching experience and the quality of professional support (Baştürk, 2016; Nureldeen, 2020).

In addition to in-service teachers, pre-service teachers represent a crucial group in understanding future curriculum implementation. Their beliefs are shaped during initial teacher education through coursework, teaching practicum, and reflective experiences. However, previous studies have identified inconsistencies between teacher preparation and classroom realities, particularly in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), which may affect their readiness to meet curriculum demands for the (Avgitidou et al., 2024a; Eryaşar & Kılınç, 2021). These challenges suggest that pre-service teachers may hold different beliefs about the urgency of English instruction from those of in-service teachers.

Despite the growing body of research on teachers' beliefs in English language education, existing studies have examined teachers' beliefs, teacher readiness, and English language policy implementation separately. However, no previous study has specifically compared the beliefs of in-service and pre-service teachers regarding the implementation of compulsory English in Indonesian primary schools within the Merdeka Curriculum. Consequently, how professional experience shapes beliefs about the urgency of English, curriculum implementation, and instructional readiness remains insufficiently understood. Addressing this gap is important because understanding the beliefs of both current and future teachers can inform teacher education and support the effective implementation of compulsory English in Indonesian primary schools.

To address the identified research gap, this study was guided by two research questions: (1) What are the beliefs of in-service and pre-service teachers regarding the urgency of English as a compulsory subject in Indonesian primary schools within the Merdeka Curriculum? and (2) How do the beliefs of in-service and pre-service teachers differ regarding the implementation of the compulsory English policy in Indonesian primary schools? Accordingly, this study aims to compare the beliefs of these two groups and to examine how professional experience influences their perceptions of compulsory English implementation. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to teacher education, curriculum implementation, and policy development in Indonesia.

METHOD

Qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a rich yet straightforward description of participants' experiences while remaining close to the data (Sandelowski, 2000). It is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to describe participants' perspectives without extensive theoretical abstraction (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). Accordingly, a qualitative descriptive design was adopted to explore and compare the beliefs of in-service and pre-service teachers regarding compulsory English in Indonesian primary schools.

Ten participants were purposively selected, comprising five in-service English teachers at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in Jambi (1–12 years of teaching experience) and five pre-service teachers enrolled in an English Education program who had completed or were undertaking their teaching practicum. This sampling strategy enabled comparison between beliefs shaped by classroom experience and those developed during initial teacher education. The study followed established ethical principles for educational research. Participants received information about the study, provided informed consent before data collection, and were assured that participation was voluntary, withdrawal could occur at any time without consequence, and confidentiality would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews exploring participants' views on the urgency of English, curriculum interpretation, the 2027 compulsory-English policy, and readiness to teach young learners. Written reflective narratives from pre-service teachers complemented the interview data by capturing their learning experiences and perceived challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL).

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, involving data familiarisation, coding, and theme development. Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section integrates the findings thematically while comparing beliefs of in-service teachers and pre-service teachers.

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Theme 1: Urgency of English in Early Education

Table 1. Subthemes, Descriptions, and Supporting Quotes of Theme 1

Sub-theme	Description of Findings	Teacher Quotes (In-service)	Student Quotes (Pre-service)
1. Digital Exposure as a Driver of Early English Learning	Primary school children are increasingly familiar with English vocabulary through games, social media, and mobile devices; this exposure fosters curiosity and makes learning more relevant.	<i>"Nowadays many games use English, so children become curious and get used to it."</i> — T2	<i>"...children are widely exposed through their phones and social media."</i> — S1
2. Golden Age for Language Learning	The primary school age is perceived as the most effective period for naturally acquiring a foreign language; early learning facilitates progress at later levels.	<i>"In lower grades, students are still unable to read and write... while in upper grades, the main challenge is writing."</i> —(T1)	<i>"...primary school is the golden age... if they learn from that stage, it won't be too difficult later."</i> — S2
3. Risks of Not Learning from an Early Age	Students without English foundations in primary school face major challenges in junior/high school, struggle to understand the material, and fall behind their peers.	<i>"If it isn't taught in MI, students will struggle in junior high because the materials start at the intermediate level."</i> — T3	<i>"...if they are not introduced to English from primary school, they will find it difficult in the future."</i> — S3
4. Support for Compulsory English	Both teachers and pre-service teachers believe English should be compulsory to prevent ability gaps and ensure equitable learning quality.	<i>"It can't just be an optional subject. It has to be compulsory."</i> — T2	<i>"...if it's optional, there will be gaps; some will understand, and others won't."</i> — S2
5. Academic and Social Benefits	Early English learning enhances memory, confidence, academic readiness, and opens opportunities for global communication and future mobility.	<i>"When my student went for umrah, she could talk to people there after learning English"</i> — T3	<i>"...English is used all over the world... it's very beneficial for the future."</i> — S2

Both pre-service teachers and in-service teachers consistently highlighted the strong urgency of introducing English in primary school; however, the underlying reasons and experiential grounding differed markedly across the two groups.

Digital Exposure as a Driver of Early English Learning

Across participants, the growing presence of English in children's digital environments was perceived as a key reason for the increasing importance of early English learning. Pre-service teachers emphasized that children are naturally exposed to English through digital media, games, and technology. As one participant noted:

"Children are already widely exposed to English through smartphones and social media." (S1)

This perception reflects a changing linguistic environment in which informal digital exposure promotes early language awareness. Previous studies similarly show that children acquire vocabulary and basic language structures through everyday interactions with online media and games (Kucker & Schneider, 2024; Montag et al., 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2022). A similar perspective was expressed by another participant, who remarked that English is “*everywhere, especially through technology*” (S2). These findings are consistent with Li et al. (2024), who argue that English increasingly serves as the default language of digital and transnational communication. Together, they suggest that formal English instruction should complement, rather than replace, children's informal exposure outside school.

Golden Age for Language Learning

Many pre-service teachers viewed primary school as the “golden age” for language acquisition. One participant stated:

“Elementary school is the golden age... if they are taught from elementary school, it will not be too difficult for them later.” (S2)

This belief reflects the view that children are more receptive to language learning and can build a stronger foundation for future English development. Similar perspectives have been reported in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), where teachers, schools, researchers, and parents generally support introducing English during primary education despite ongoing debate over the most appropriate starting age (Amin et al., 2023; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2023). Research also indicates that children demonstrate heightened phonological sensitivity and strong imitative abilities during this developmental stage (Justice et al., 2005; Łockiewicz et al., 2018). From Borg's (2003) perspective, these beliefs are shaped by participants' educational experiences and understanding of children's language development.

In contrast, in-service teachers interpreted the “golden age” through classroom experience. As one teacher observed:

“In lower grades, students are still unable to read and write... while in upper grades, the main challenge is writing.” (T1)

Together, these findings suggest that although primary school is widely regarded as an optimal period for learning English, effective instruction depends on developmentally appropriate pedagogy aligned with children's literacy readiness.

Risks of Not Learning from an Early Age

Both groups recognized the long-term academic consequences of delayed English learning, although in-service teachers expressed this concern more strongly. Teachers frequently observed that students without primary-level English experience struggled when entering junior secondary school. As one teacher explained:

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"Without English instruction in MI, students face difficulties in junior high school due to immediate exposure to intermediate-level materials." (T3)

This observation is consistent with studies indicating that delayed second-language exposure may widen academic gaps and increase learners' cognitive load when they encounter more complex linguistic input (Dang et al., 2022; Lester et al., 2024).

Pre-service teachers expressed similar concerns through their own learning experiences. One participant noted:

"If it is not introduced from elementary school, they will have difficulty absorbing it later." (S1)

Another participant reflected that although English initially seemed difficult, sustained exposure from primary school gradually transformed that difficulty into enjoyment, explaining that *"Initially, I viewed English as a difficult subject to understand... However, over time, that sense of difficulty slowly turned into a sense of pleasure"* (S2). Similarly, S1 recalled that learning English in junior secondary school felt easier because *"some of the materials had already been learned in elementary school"* (S1). These findings suggest that participants viewed early English instruction as a means of preventing future academic difficulties by establishing a stronger foundation for subsequent learning. The contrast between teachers' classroom observations and pre-service teachers' personal learning experiences supports Borg's (2003) view that beliefs are shaped by both professional and personal experiences.

Support for Compulsory English

Most pre-service teachers supported making English compulsory at the primary level to ensure equitable learning opportunities. One participant cautioned that without compulsory status, *"There will be a gap; those who know and those who do not will become different"* (S2). This concern is consistent with language policy research suggesting that optional English instruction often leads to unequal access, particularly in under-resourced schools (Alajmi, 2021; Evans et al., 2020).

In-service teachers expressed even stronger support, frequently referring to parental expectations and community encouragement. As one teacher noted:

"There has never been any objection; in fact, parents are supportive." (T4)

This finding aligns with studies showing that compulsory curriculum status strengthens institutional legitimacy, resource allocation, and stakeholder support (Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2023). Participants therefore viewed compulsory English as both a pedagogical necessity and a policy mechanism for promoting more consistent implementation across schools.

Nevertheless, one pre-service teacher argued that English should not necessarily be compulsory because children should first master foundational literacy in Indonesian and Mathematics:

"English does not necessarily have to be mandatory in elementary school, because students should first master foundational literacy in Indonesian and Mathematics." (S1).

This concern reflects early-grade education research emphasizing the need to balance language instruction with learners' cognitive and literacy readiness (Siahaan, 2022). Another participant reinforced the value of sustained English instruction by recalling that *"My teacher used to assign weekly vocabulary memorization... from that, I began to realize that vocabulary memorization became the gateway to my understanding of English"* (S2). This experience suggests that systematic and continuous English instruction supports more equitable and consistent language development from an early age.

Academic and Social Benefits

Both teachers and pre-service teachers associated early English learning with cognitive development, vocabulary growth, and better preparation for secondary education. A pre-service teacher noted that English helps *"train memory"* (S1). This perception is supported by research indicating that early bilingual or multilingual exposure enhances working memory and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Justice et al., 2005).

S5's experience further illustrates these benefits. She recalled how basic vocabulary and greeting introduced in primary school formed a crucial foundation for later learning:

"That experience was an important beginning... the teacher introduced forms of greetings and the names of objects in English along with their pronunciation." (S5)

However, this advantage was not sustained because English was later removed from her primary school curriculum, leaving her feeling left behind after entering secondary school. She explained: *"The English subject was removed... this condition made me feel left behind for a while."* (S5)

This experience is consistent with research showing that discontinuity in early language instruction can disrupt cumulative learning and reduce learners' confidence (Gonzales & Hughes, 2018). Beyond academic benefits, Participants also emphasized the social and communicative value of early English learning. One teacher shared:

"One of my students went to Umrah with their parents and was able to talk with people there after taking English lessons with me." (T3)

This account reflects sociocultural perspectives that view language as a tool for social participation and identity formation rather than merely an academic subject (Li et al., 2024; Norton, 2013). Similarly, S5 explained that English enabled her to enjoy songs and television programmes, increasing her confidence and motivation: *"I felt happy... especially when I could enjoy English songs or television programs with the help of subtitles"* (S5). Taken together, these findings suggest that participants viewed early English instruction as supporting

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learners' cognitive development, social participation, and readiness for future learning.

Theme 2: Support and Concerns Regarding the Mandatory 2027 Policy

Table 2. Subthemes, Descriptions, and Supporting Quotes of Theme 2

Sub-theme	Description of Findings	Teacher Quotes (In-service)	Student Quotes (Pre-service)
1. Support for the Policy	Both teachers and pre-service teachers support the policy to make English compulsory starting in 2027, considering it important and timely.	<i>"I strongly agree... this should have been implemented long ago."</i> – T2	<i>"I fully support it... it should have been implemented even earlier."</i> – S2
2. Government and School Readiness	Pre-service teachers question the readiness of the government and schools; teachers observe firsthand that many public primary schools are not yet prepared.	<i>"Many public primary schools are not ready; there is a shortage of teachers."</i> – T1	<i>"I think the government isn't ready... the facilities are not evenly distributed."</i> – S1
3. Urban-Rural Disparities	Both groups believe implementation will be uneven; rural areas are disadvantaged in terms of teachers and facilities.	<i>"In rural areas, teachers are very limited... some are not even English graduates."</i> – T4	<i>"Rural areas will definitely lag behind... the facilities are very different."</i> – S3
4. Knowledge of the Policy	Teachers have been informed about the 2027 policy through school meetings and briefings; some pre-service teachers only learned about it during the interview.	<i>"Yes, we were informed by the principal."</i> – T3	<i>"I just learned about this policy from your interview."</i> – S4
5. Implementation Challenges	Both highlight major challenges: a lack of competent teachers, lack of facilities, and student readiness.	<i>"There's a lack of media and facilities, so we have to be creative."</i> – T1	<i>"The challenge is that teachers are not very skilled... especially in rural areas."</i> – S5
6. Structural Support from Government and Schools	Support is perceived as not yet optimal; teachers only receive books without training, and pre-service teachers feel that universities have not fully prepared them either.	<i>"We have the books, but there's no training... teachers have to find things on their own."</i> – T2	<i>"In my opinion, support from the government and the campus is still lacking."</i> – S5

The analysis shows that both in-service teachers and pre-service teachers generally support the government's policy designating English as a compulsory subject beginning in 2027. Their positive attitudes stem from a shared belief that early English learning is increasingly essential for preparing learners to participate in a globalized and digitally connected world. However, this support is accompanied by concerns regarding implementation, as participants questioned whether schools possess sufficient professional capacity, institutional support, and equitable educational resources to enact the policy effectively across diverse contexts.

Support for the Policy

Teachers and pre-service teachers strongly supported the 2027 compulsory English policy, often describing it as long overdue. Teachers viewed the policy as a necessary response to the growing importance of English in primary education. One teacher emphasized:

"I strongly agree... this should have been done earlier." (T2)

A similar perspective was expressed by several pre-service teachers, who also perceived the policy as overdue. As stated by S2, *"I fully support it... it should have been implemented sooner."* This shared support reflects a broad professional consensus that English is widely perceived as an essential form of academic, social, and economic capital. This consensus is further underpinned by a shared belief that compulsory English instruction can provide learners with more equitable opportunities to develop competencies needed for future education and employment, consistent with previous studies indicating that English proficiency in Indonesia is strongly associated with aspirations for social mobility and future competitiveness (Setyaningrum et al., 2022; Widiastuti et al., 2021). These findings provide a favourable foundation for policy implementation; however, successful implementation will ultimately depend on the readiness of governments and schools to address existing structural challenges.

Government and School Readiness

Despite strong policy support, participants raised significant concerns regarding the government's and schools' readiness to implement the policy effectively. Teachers evaluated readiness based on their direct experiences in schools. One teacher explained:

"Many public primary schools are not ready; they lack teachers." (T1)

In contrast, pre-service teachers articulated concerns from a more conceptual standpoint. S1 stated, *"In my opinion, the government is not ready... the facilities are not evenly distributed,"* reflecting an understanding shaped primarily by broader policy discussions rather than first-hand classroom experience. This divergence illustrates the contrast between policy perceptions and classroom realities. It reflects the different professional positions of the two groups: teachers evaluated readiness through their daily classroom experiences, whereas pre-service teachers relied more on broader perceptions of educational policy and resource distribution. This pattern is commonly observed in studies of educational reform, where policy ideals often clash with classroom realities (Arif et al., 2024; Wulandari et al., 2020). These findings suggest that successful policy implementation requires not only policy commitment but also concrete investment in teacher recruitment and school resources to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

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Urban–Rural Disparities

Both teachers and pre-service teachers expressed strong concerns about unequal policy implementation between urban and rural schools. Pre-service teachers anticipated that rural schools would face greater challenges due to limited infrastructure and learning resources. One student stated:

“Rural areas will definitely lag behind... the facilities are very different.”
(S3)

Teachers reinforced this concern with concrete examples from their professional experience:

“In rural areas, teachers are very limited... some are not even English graduates.” (T4)

These shared concerns reflect persistent structural inequalities in Indonesian education system. Although their perspectives originated from different experiences, both groups consistently identified unequal teacher distribution and limited educational resources as major barriers to equitable policy implementation. This concern is consistent with previous studies showing that disparities in teacher distribution and school facilities continue to constrain equitable educational reform across Indonesia (Wulandari et al., 2020). Participants' accounts indicate that without targeted interventions, the 2027 policy risks reinforcing rather than reducing educational inequity.

Knowledge of the Policy

A notable difference emerged between teachers and pre-service teachers regarding their awareness of the 2027 policy. Most teachers reported receiving formal information through principals or curriculum meetings. One teacher stated:

“Yes, we were informed by the principal.” (T3)

In contrast, several pre-service teachers admitted that they were unaware of the policy prior to the interview. As S4 acknowledged, *“I only found out about this policy from this interview.”* This finding indicates a communication gap between government policy initiatives and teacher education institutions (LPTK), suggesting that policy information has not been disseminated systematically to prospective teachers during their professional preparation. Policy readiness thus involves not only infrastructure and teacher availability but also effective communication with future teachers responsible for implementing the reform. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies reporting weak policy dissemination channels between ministries and teacher education institutions (Senognoeva et al., 2020). If left unaddressed, this communication gap may undermine future teachers' preparedness and compromise the consistency of policy implementation across schools.

Implementation Challenges

Participants from both groups identified several challenges to implementing the compulsory English policy, particularly shortages of qualified teachers and

limited instructional resources. Teachers mainly highlighted classroom-level constraints. One teacher explained:

"There is a lack of media, a lack of facilities, so we have to be creative." (T1)

Pre-service teachers expressed similar concerns, particularly regarding teacher competence in rural contexts. S5 stated, *"The challenge is that teachers are not very skilled... especially in rural areas."* These shared perceptions further reinforce the view that structural and human resource limitations remain major barriers to effective policy implementation. This finding aligns with Tricahyati and Zaim (2023), who identified teacher readiness as a critical factor in the successful implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum.

Participants also emphasized that successful implementation depends not only on resources but also on teachers' pedagogical competence. This perspective was particularly evident in S1's written reflection:

"No matter how good the prepared materials are, if the way they are delivered or executed in the classroom does not work, then the learning cannot be considered effective." (S1)

This reflection suggests that improving facilities alone is insufficient without teachers who can translate curriculum objectives into effective classroom practice. These findings highlight the importance of sustained professional development alongside policy implementation.

Structural Support from Government and Schools

Both teachers and pre-service teachers perceived existing structural support as insufficient. Teachers noted that while textbooks were available, professional development opportunities were limited. One teacher stated:

"We have the books, but there is no training... teachers have to find things on their own." (T2)

Pre-service teachers echoed this concern. S5 remarked, *"I think support from the government and the campus is still lacking."* These findings highlight that successful policy implementation requires stronger coordination and shared responsibility among government agencies, schools, and teacher education institutions. Previous studies emphasize that policy sustainability depends heavily on continuous professional development and institutional alignment rather than curriculum mandates alone (Senognoeva et al., 2020; Widiastuti et al., 2021).

Overall, both teachers and pre-service teachers strongly supported the 2027 compulsory English policy while recognizing concerns about readiness, equity, communication, and structural support. Teachers emphasized classroom realities, whereas pre-service teachers offered more future-oriented perspectives. Together, these findings suggest that successful implementation will depend on teacher preparation, sustained professional development,

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equitable resource distribution, and effective coordination among government agencies, schools, and teacher education institutions.

Theme 3: Professional Readiness and Competence

Table 3. Subthemes, Descriptions, and Supporting Quotes of Theme 3

Sub-theme	Description of Findings	Teacher Quotes (In-service)	Student Quotes (Pre-service)
1. School and Teacher Readiness as the Key Determinant	Teachers believe that school readiness depends on the availability of qualified teachers and adequate facilities; students agree that teachers are the most critical factor for successful implementation.	<i>"Many public primary schools are not ready... they lack teachers."</i> – T1 <i>"Teachers are fairly ready, but the facilities are lacking."</i> — T2	<i>"The most urgent aspect is the teachers' readiness."</i> – S1
2. Urban–Rural Readiness Gap	Both teachers and pre-service teachers perceive that urban schools are more prepared than rural ones, particularly in terms of language exposure, number of teachers, and available facilities.	<i>"In rural areas, teachers are very limited... some are not even English graduates"</i> T4	<i>Schools in rural areas are not ready... the facilities are inadequate."</i> – S3
3. Teacher Self-Efficacy)	Pre-service teachers report having basic knowledge but lacking confidence to teach in primary schools; teachers feel ready in terms of materials but still need improvement in pedagogical competence.	<i>"The materials are ready, but I still need to improve my competence."</i> – T3	<i>"We are not yet ready to teach English in primary schools."</i> – S1 <i>"I have the knowledge, but I'm not confident yet when facing the students."</i> – S2
4. Challenges in Teaching Primary School Learners	Challenges include classroom management, uneven early literacy skills, and the tendency of young learners to become bored easily. Teachers also emphasize the differences in readiness between lower and upper grades.	<i>"Lower-grade students cannot read and write yet... upper grades struggle mainly with writing."</i> – T1	<i>"The biggest challenges are classroom management and adapting the materials."</i> – S3 <i>"Primary school children get bored easily and have difficulty focusing."</i> – S4
5. The Role of Universities in Professional Preparation	Pre-service teachers feel that their TEYL preparation is not optimal and is still too focused on teaching at the junior and senior high school level; teachers also note that their own professional training remains limited and requires more practical skill development.	<i>"KKG meetings are mandatory, but they're different from training with expert facilitators."</i> – T5	<i>"We are prepared for teaching in junior and senior high schools, not for primary students."</i> – S3 <i>"TEYL should be divided into several separate courses."</i> – S1

The findings indicate that the professional readiness of teachers and pre-service teachers is a key factor determining the success of implementing English as a compulsory subject in primary schools (SD/MI). Both groups agreed that professional readiness extends beyond language proficiency to include pedagogical competence, classroom management skills, and institutional support. However, their perspectives differed in emphasis. In-service teachers evaluated readiness primarily from their classroom experience, highlighting practical challenges such as teaching competence, facilities, and professional development. In contrast, pre-service teachers viewed readiness mainly in terms of their own preparedness, emphasizing confidence, limited TEYL training, and the need for greater practical experience.

School and Teacher Readiness as the Key Determinant

Teachers perceived school readiness to depend largely on competent teachers and adequate facilities. Many primary schools, particularly public schools, were reported to lack teachers with formal English education backgrounds. One teacher emphasized:

“Many public primary schools are not ready... they lack teachers.” (T1)

Although adequate facilities were considered important, participants consistently identified teacher competence as the primary determinant of school readiness. This finding suggests that teacher competence underpins institutional readiness because teachers ultimately translate policy into classroom practice.

Pre-service teachers expressed similar views, identifying teachers as the key factor in successful policy implementation. As S1 stated, *“The most urgent aspect is the teachers’ readiness.”* Such findings align with research indicating that subject-matter knowledge alone is insufficient for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL); pedagogical competence tailored to children’s developmental characteristics is equally critical ((Otaiba et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2008).

S2’s reflection further strengthens this point by illustrating how teacher quality shapes students’ motivation and learning. She recalled:

“My teacher at that time had a habit of giving routine assignments... Even though there was a small penalty, I actually felt motivated to learn.” (S2)

Her experience illustrates how structured and engaging pedagogy fosters positive learning dispositions, reinforcing teacher competence as the cornerstone of school readiness. These findings highlight teacher quality as the primary priority for successful nationwide implementation of compulsory English.

Urban–Rural Readiness Gap

Both teachers and pre-service teachers highlighted disparities in school readiness between urban and rural schools. Teachers emphasized the shortage of qualified English teachers, particularly in rural schools.

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"In rural areas, teachers are limited... some are not even English graduates." (T4)

Pre-service teachers expressed similar concerns, focusing on inadequate facilities. As S3 noted, *"Schools in rural areas are not ready... the facilities are inadequate."* This difference reflects their respective experiences: teachers emphasized staffing challenges, whereas pre-service teachers focused on infrastructural limitations. These findings suggest that school readiness depends not only on local resources but also on inequalities in teacher distribution and educational investment across regions. Previous studies similarly identify geographical disparities as a persistent challenge to language education reform, particularly in decentralized education systems (Wulandari et al., 2020).

These findings highlight the need for equitable teacher deployment and resource allocation, particularly in underserved rural schools.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Pre-service teachers generally perceived themselves as possessing adequate theoretical knowledge but lacking confidence in teaching primary school learners. As S2 expressed:

"I have the knowledge, but I'm not confident yet when facing the students." (S2)

S2 further explained that professional confidence develops through practical experience and guidance from lecturers:

"I still need further support from the university and lecturers... to gain more confidence in teaching." (S2)

These responses suggest that participants' teaching confidence depends not only on theoretical knowledge but also on opportunities to apply it in authentic classroom settings. These findings align with previous research critiquing teacher education programs for emphasizing theoretical preparation while providing limited practical exposure to TEYL contexts (Setyaningrum et al., 2022; Tekin & Baykara, 2023). Unlike pre-service teachers, in-service teachers expressed greater confidence in managing classroom instruction but continued to recognize the need for ongoing pedagogical improvement. As T3 stated:

"The materials are ready, but I still need to improve my competence." (T3)

These findings highlight distinct professional development needs, suggesting that teacher education institutions and education authorities should provide differentiated support by expanding practical teaching opportunities for pre-service teachers while ensuring continuous pedagogical development for in-service teachers.

Challenges in Teaching Primary School Learners

Although both groups expressed confidence in their professional readiness, they also acknowledged challenges in teaching English to young learners, particularly related to literacy development and classroom management. Teachers highlighted foundational literacy issues in lower grades:

“Lower-grade students cannot read and write yet... while upper grades struggle mostly with writing.” (T1)

Pre-service teachers emphasized pedagogical and developmental challenges. As S3 noted, *“the biggest challenges are classroom management and adapting materials,”* while S4 observed that young learners “get bored easily and have difficulty focusing.” These differences reflect their professional roles: teachers emphasized classroom realities, whereas pre-service teachers focused on pedagogical strategies and learners' developmental characteristics. This finding aligns with TEYL research emphasizing play-based, multisensory, and experiential approaches that address young learners' developmental needs (Chankob & Hdouch, 2024; Spencer et al., 2008). These challenges stem from both limited instructional resources and the developmental characteristics of young learners, highlighting the need for age-appropriate pedagogical preparation and continuous professional development.

The Role of Universities in Professional Preparation

Pre-service teachers perceived that universities had not adequately prepared them for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). As S3 stated, *“We are prepared for teaching in junior and senior high schools, not for primary students.”* S1 further suggested curriculum restructuring, noting that “TEYL should be divided into several separate courses.” These responses indicate a mismatch between university preparation and the competencies required for teaching English at the primary level. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that teacher education curricula in Indonesia remain largely oriented toward secondary education and provide limited methodological preparation for primary-level instruction (Setyaningrum et al., 2022; Tekin & Baykara, 2023).

In-service teachers expressed similar concerns regarding the limited availability of structured professional development. As T5 explained:

“KKG meetings are mandatory, but they’re different from training with expert facilitators.” (T5)

These findings highlight the need for curriculum reform in teacher education programs and sustained professional development for practicing teachers. International evidence also emphasizes that continuous teacher training is essential for strengthening pedagogical readiness in TEYL contexts (Chankob & Hdouch, 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that professional readiness is a key determinant of successful English instruction in primary schools. Both teachers and pre-service teachers viewed readiness as encompassing not only subject knowledge but also pedagogical competence, classroom management skills, and institutional support. However, teachers' perspectives were shaped by classroom experience, whereas pre-service teachers drew primarily on academic preparation and limited teaching experience. These complementary perspectives highlight the need to strengthen teacher preparation through improved university curricula, sustained professional development, and stronger

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government support to ensure the equitable and effective implementation of the compulsory English policy in primary schools.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that both teachers and pre-service teachers recognize the growing importance of introducing English at the primary school level, particularly given children's early exposure to digital media and the developmental benefits of early language learning. Although both groups support the 2027 compulsory English policy, they also identify major implementation challenges, including disparities in school resources, shortages of qualified teachers, and insufficient preparation for teaching young learners.

The findings indicate a mismatch between policy expectations and the readiness of schools and teacher education institutions. Participants' beliefs were shaped by learning experiences, teaching practice, professional interactions, and contextual factors such as unequal access to educational resources. They emphasized the need for enhanced teacher education, clearer curricular guidance, equitable resource allocation, and stronger collaboration among government, schools, and universities.

Successful implementation of compulsory English requires more than policy endorsement. It depends on teacher competence, adequate resources, and sustained institutional support to ensure equitable access to quality English education across Indonesia.

This study contributes to the literature by providing one of the few comparative analyses of in-service and pre-service teachers' beliefs regarding professional readiness for implementing compulsory English instruction in Indonesian primary schools. Integrating both perspectives offers a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with the 2027 policy. However, the study was conducted in a single provincial context with a relatively small sample, limiting the transferability of the findings. Future research should include participants from diverse regions, as well as policymakers and school leaders, or adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to examine how professional readiness develops during policy implementation.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

Author 1, **Nely Arif**, conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted data analysis, and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. Author 2, **Robi Soma**, contributed to manuscript revision by providing substantive feedback, improving the clarity and structure of the article, and disseminating the research findings through an international seminar. Authors 3 and 4, **Reny Heryanti** and **Habizar**, reviewed the manuscript and approved the final version for publication. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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