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NAVIGATING THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM: INDONESIAN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' READINESS AND CHALLENGES IN TEACHING COMPULSORY ENGLISH

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Abstract: Indonesia will make English a compulsory subject in elementary schools from 2027, but many primary schools have had little provision for English before now. This study asks how ready elementary English teachers feel for the change and what problems they expect. As the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods project, it used semi-structured interviews of five teachers chosen from public and private schools in Lampung Province, analysed through thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: gaps in school resources, differences in teacher readiness and confidence, unequal access to professional development, and shared worries about assessment, parental support, and class size. Four English-trained teachers said they felt ready, most confidently in the private schools; the one teacher without English training did not, and hoped a qualified colleague could join her school. The findings indicate that, without targeted support for resources, training, and teacher qualification, compulsory English may widen the gap between schools rather than close it.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum; teacher readiness; English for young learners; elementary education; educational equity

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian education is changing under the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), which gives schools more flexibility and centres learning on student competencies. One of its changes is a plan to make English a compulsory subject in elementary schools from 2027 ((Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2024; Hadi Santoso, 2025). The aim is to give

children earlier exposure to a language that has become central to education and work across the Asia-Pacific region (Nunan, 2003).

English at primary level is not new in Indonesia. It was taught as a local-content subject for years before being removed from the national curriculum in 2013, so the 2027 plan brings it back as a required subject (British Council, 2024). Earlier Indonesian studies had already begun to ask what that elementary English provision achieved for later learning (Rachmajanti, 2008). Whether the change works now depends heavily on whether elementary teachers are ready to teach it. English has long been a core subject in secondary schools, but many elementary schools have little or no provision for it, which raises questions about teacher preparation, resources, and the problems teachers face in different kinds of schools.

Research on early English learning offers a more cautious picture than is often assumed. An early start can help, but age by itself guarantees little; the gains depend on trained teachers, age-appropriate methods, enough materials, and continuity between primary and later schooling (Pinter, 2011). Large international studies of teaching English to young learners report the same point from inside the classroom: teachers across many countries struggle with speaking, motivation, differentiation, and large classes, and the difficulties grow where teachers are undertrained (Garton et al., 2011; Copland et al., 2014).

Teacher readiness covers content knowledge, teaching skill, confidence, and access to professional development. A teacher's sense of preparedness, or self-efficacy, shapes the goals they set, their persistence, and their effectiveness (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), and it carries through to students' learning (Zein, 2016). In Indonesia the concern is sharper because many primary English teachers were trained for secondary teaching, or for general elementary teaching, rather than for English with young children (Zein, 2017). At the same time, the school system carries wide gaps between urban and rural areas and between public and private schools in facilities, materials, teacher qualifications, and chances for further training (Febriana et al., 2018; Zein et al., 2020). These gaps raise the question of whether all children will gain equally from a reform such as compulsory English.

This study examines how a small group of elementary English teachers in Lampung view the coming mandate. It asks three questions: (1) How ready do the teachers feel to teach compulsory English under the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) What resources and institutional support do they have? (3) What challenges do they expect as 2027 approaches? By drawing on teachers from both public and private schools, the study aims to give policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators a clearer view of what the reform will require. This article reports the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study of teacher readiness; the questionnaire results from the same project are reported separately.

METHOD

This article draws on the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study of elementary teachers' readiness to teach compulsory English. The quantitative results, from a questionnaire survey, are reported separately, and the present article focuses on the interview data. The qualitative design used semi-structured interviews, which suited the aim of understanding teachers' own experiences, views, and concerns about compulsory English under the Merdeka Curriculum.

The study took place in Lampung Province, Indonesia. Five elementary English teachers were chosen purposively to represent different institutional contexts and professional backgrounds (Patton, 2015), three from public schools and two from private schools, with each given a letter as a pseudonym. Purposive sampling allowed the deliberate inclusion of varied cases, so that the sample would show different readiness profiles rather than a single typical one. The schools ranged from well-resourced private schools in urban Bandar Lampung to public schools in semi-urban, suburban, and lower-income areas, including the more rural regency of Lampung Tengah (Central Lampung). Table 1 summarises the participants.

Table 1. Participant profiles

Characteristic	Teacher D	Teacher E	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
School and setting	Private; urban, middle–upper income	Private international; partial English-medium	Public; semi-urban	Public; suburban	Public; lower-income area
Age	35	29	33	40	33
Teaching experience	7 yrs (English)	5 yrs (English)	8 yrs; 6 in English	15 yrs; 8 in English	8 yrs; 3 in English
Qualification	BA English Education; MA TEFL	BA English Education	BA English Education	BA English Education	BA PGSD (not English)
English taught from	Grade 1	Grades 3–6	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 4
Professional development	Regular; some international events	Extensive digital resources and technology	Two generic workshops in 5 yrs	None English-specific in 3 yrs	None for English teaching
Self-assessed English	Strong (MPd., TEFL)	Strong (works in partial English)	Intermediate–advanced	Intermediate	Intermediate; uses dictionaries

The profiles show how unevenly preparation was distributed. Teacher D and Teacher E, in the private schools, combined English-education degrees with regular training and rich resources. Among the public-school teachers, Teacher A and Teacher B held English-education degrees but had little recent subject-specific training, and Teacher C held a degree in elementary education rather than English: she had been assigned to teach the subject when the previous English teacher left and no specialist replacement could be found, had never taken part in any professional development for English, and still taught mathematics and science to her homeroom class alongside it. The three public-school teachers reported limited access to professional development and inadequate facilities, while the two private-school teachers described well-resourced settings with regular support.

Each teacher took part in one individual interview lasting about 45 to 60 minutes, audio-recorded with consent. The questions covered their understanding of the curriculum's English requirements, their current practices and preparations, their sense of readiness and confidence, the resources and support available to them, the challenges they expected in 2027, and their suggestions for better preparation. The full interview protocol appears in the Appendix.

All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the participants' first language, so that the teachers could speak freely and express their views without the constraint of a second language. The excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by the researcher. In translating, the wording was refined for grammar and readability so that the quotations read fluently in English, while the meaning, tone, and intent of each speaker were kept intact. The polished form of the excerpt therefore reflects the editing of the translation, not the original spoken delivery, which was less formal and less fluent.

The recordings were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, working through familiarisation, initial coding, searching for and reviewing themes, and defining the final themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was both inductive and deductive, so that new issues could surface while the analysis stayed tied to the research questions. To support trustworthiness, themes were checked back against the full transcripts and kept close to the participants' own words, and the limits of the data are set out at the end of the next section (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants were told the purpose of the study, gave written consent, and were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Four themes came out of the interviews: gaps in school resources, differences in readiness and confidence, unequal access to professional development, and shared concerns about how the policy will work in practice. The teachers' school type and background shaped each one. The themes are presented in turn, but they

are not separate problems. As the analysis below shows, the same dividing line runs through all four, and the final subsection draws them together.

School Resources and Institutional Support

The clearest difference ran between private and public schools. The private-school teachers described well-equipped rooms and years of experience teaching English from Grade 1. One said:

> *"We have English corners in every classroom, a dedicated English lab with multimedia equipment, and access to various digital learning platforms. Our students are already familiar with English from an early age, so the transition to compulsory English under the Merdeka Curriculum feels more like a formalisation of what we're already doing."*

The word this teacher chose, formalisation, is telling. For her school the 2027 mandate changes almost nothing, because the school already does more than the policy will ask. This exposes an assumption built into the policy: that schools are starting English more or less from the same point. They are not. The same mandate that means paperwork for a private school means building provision from almost nothing for a public one.

The public-school teachers described that second situation. A teacher from a school where English starts in Grade 4 said:

> *"We don't even have proper textbooks for English yet. I often have to create my own materials or print worksheets using my personal resources. Our school has a computer lab, but it's rarely functional, and we have no internet connection reliable enough for online learning activities."*

Another spoke of classrooms holding up to forty students, with no English corner and no multimedia equipment. What stands out is that the gap is not only material. It bundles three things together: physical resources, accumulated experience (a Grade 1 start gives years of practice with young learners), and administrative priority. These reinforce one another. A school that funds an English lab also tends to fund training and protect timetable space, so advantages cluster in the same places, and so do disadvantages. The shortage of resources also sets a hard limit on method. The interactive, communicative teaching the Merdeka Curriculum favours is difficult to run with forty children, no materials, and no space, so the resource gap quietly becomes a pedagogy gap. Large classes and underdeveloped teacher competence are among the most common problems teachers of young learners report worldwide (Copland et al., 2014); here they fall almost entirely on one side of the divide, matching earlier findings that under-resourced Indonesian schools struggle with support that better-funded schools take for granted (Febriana et al., 2018).

Readiness and Confidence

When asked directly, four of the five teachers said they felt ready to teach English as a compulsory subject; the exception was the one teacher without an English background. Readiness was strongest in the private schools, where it rested on specialised training, years with young learners, and continuing development. Teacher D explained:

> *"I feel well-prepared for the 2027 implementation. I've been teaching English to elementary students for seven years, and I've participated in numerous workshops on young-learner pedagogy. The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on student-centred learning aligns well with the approaches we've already been using."*

Read through the lens of self-efficacy theory, this confidence has clear sources. Bandura (1997) argued that efficacy is built mainly from mastery experiences, watching others succeed, encouragement, and a person's emotional state, and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) showed the same for teachers in particular. Teacher D has all four: seven years of success, a master's in TEFL and repeated workshops, an employer that backs her, and a setting calm enough to keep anxiety low.

The two public-school teachers with English backgrounds, Teacher A and Teacher B, also said they felt ready, though their readiness was more conditional. They trusted their training, yet rated their own English only as intermediate to intermediate-advanced, had had little recent subject-specific development, and worried about applying the curriculum with few resources and with much younger children than they were used to. Their readiness held, in other words, as long as support arrived. Teacher C, who has no English background, was the one teacher who did not feel ready:

> *"Honestly, I'm quite nervous about this. I became an English teacher not by choice but because the school needed someone to teach it. My English is just okay—certainly not native-like—and I haven't studied how to teach English specifically. I rely heavily on textbooks and sometimes worry that I'm making mistakes that confuse my students."*

Her account is the mirror image of Teacher D's. She has no mastery experience in English teaching, no relevant models, no encouragement, and visible anxiety. On the same theory, low confidence is not a personal failing but the predictable result of teaching without any of the experiences that build efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Her phrasing, "not by choice," adds a further layer: she does not see herself as an English teacher, so the problem is partly one of professional identity, not only skill. This sits within a wider pattern, since in some public schools teachers are assigned to English by staffing need rather than

qualification. Language teaching draws on specific knowledge of second-language learning, pronunciation, and methods for young children, and placing teachers without that background, especially once the subject is compulsory, puts both teaching quality and the teacher's confidence at risk. The pattern is well documented in Indonesian primary English, where many teachers came to the role without preparation for young learners (Zein, 2016; Zein et al., 2020). Rather than claim a readiness she did not feel, Teacher C hoped that a more skilled English teacher could join her school, so that the children would get more than she felt able to give them on her own. Read across the five teachers, the same point recurs: the teacher who lacked English training was also the one without the resources, models, or development to draw on, so readiness tracked the support each teacher had, not their effort or goodwill.

Access to Professional Development

Access to training divided the two groups sharply. The private-school teachers described regular, funded workshops on both English teaching and the Merdeka Curriculum, along with informal support such as cross-school teacher groups on WhatsApp. The public-school teachers reported the reverse: occasional announcements, no budget for transport or accommodation, no substitute teachers to free them, and a sense that programmes favour secondary or urban schools. One said:

> *"We hear about training programmes for the Merdeka Curriculum, but they seem to prioritise secondary-school teachers or schools in urban areas. I feel like elementary teachers in public schools like ours are forgotten. We need the training the most, but we have the least access to it."*

The two situations map almost exactly onto what the literature says effective professional development requires. The private-school teachers' training is sustained (year-round and budgeted), focused on real content (storytelling, young-learner pedagogy, digital tools), and collaborative (the cross-school groups), which is close to the model research recommends (Guskey, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The public-school teachers' self-directed YouTube study is the opposite on every count: one-off, generic, solitary, and without feedback. When one teacher said there was no one to ask and that she felt she was guessing, she named precisely the active learning and feedback that the effective-development literature treats as essential. Self-study stands in for training but cannot replace it.

It matters that these barriers are structural, not a matter of motivation. The public-school teachers wanted training more, not less; what stopped them was money, cover, distance, and a sense of being overlooked. This makes unequal access more than one gap among several. Training is how a teacher turns a new curriculum into classroom practice, so the group with the least training will struggle most to enact the very reform meant to help their students. The gap feeds itself, which is

why it deserves to be read as a cause of the other themes rather than a parallel to them.

Expected Challenges in Practice

Across both groups, the teachers raised similar worries, though the weight of each differed, and several of them reveal a tension inside the curriculum itself. On assessment, the teachers were unsure how to judge young learners through a formative, competency-based approach rather than ordinary tests. That approach is pedagogically progressive, but it asks for more expertise and more time per child than a simple test, which the large, under-resourced classes can least afford, so the more advanced assessment model may be hardest exactly where support is thinnest. The worry about fitting English into a full timetable, and about adding it while children are still building Bahasa Indonesia literacy, touches a real debate about early bilingual literacy; it is not unfounded, and it deserves clear official guidance rather than being left to each teacher to resolve.

Parental involvement drew the most varied responses, and here the divide between schools appeared in a different form. In the private schools the worry was that parents misunderstood modern methods. Teacher D explained:

> *"Parents sometimes think that if children are playing games or doing arts and crafts in English class, they're not learning—they expect to see workbooks filled with exercises and homework. Helping parents understand that engaged, enjoyable learning is actually more effective than drill-and-practice will require ongoing communication."*

Her concern is about expectation rather than support: the parents are engaged but want visible drill, so part of her work is to defend play-based learning to them. The public-school teachers described the opposite problem, a shortage of support rooted in the parents' own histories. Teacher A said:

> *"Many of our students' parents didn't learn English in school or learned it poorly, so they might not see its importance or value. Getting parental support for homework, practice at home, or even just encouragement will be difficult. Some parents might question why we're teaching English when their children struggle with Indonesian and mathematics—they see it as an unnecessary luxury rather than an important skill."*

Where Teacher D's parents valued English but misjudged how it is learned, Teacher A's parents questioned whether it should be taught at all, weighing it against subjects their children already found hard. Teacher B took the point further and named the material side of the gap:

> *"In private schools, parents can help children with English homework or hire tutors, but our students' parents can't. So any English learning happens*

> *only during school time, putting our students at a disadvantage. This inequality will likely widen gaps between students from different backgrounds."*

This is the equity argument made from inside the classroom. The same hours of English at school lead to different outcomes once home support is added, because private-school families can extend learning through help and tutoring while public-school families cannot, so the school day is the only English many of these children will get. Another public-school teacher tied this to wider home circumstances:

> *"Many of our students come from broken homes, which somehow affects the way they learn, not only in English but in other subjects too. I have to admit that their English is far behind that of children from urban areas."*

Taken together, these accounts show that parental involvement is not one challenge but a marker of the same divide that runs through the other themes. For the private schools it is a matter of managing expectations; for the public schools it compounds every other disadvantage, and the teachers themselves named it as a force that will widen the gap between children rather than close it.

Differentiation drew particular concern, and with reason. Adapting one lesson to a wide range of abilities is demanding even with strong support and small classes (Tomlinson, 2014); in a room of forty mixed-ability children with one untrained teacher it is close to impossible. The curriculum asks for differentiation that its present conditions do not allow. The non-specialist teacher's fear of modelling incorrect English is a genuine quality concern and links straight back to the qualification problem, and teachers whose schools currently start English in later grades were left without guidance on how to move the starting point earlier. These are the same challenges teachers of young learners report across very different countries (Copland et al., 2014); the difference here is distributional. The challenges are universal, but the buffers that make them manageable, resources, training, and small classes, are missing on one side of the divide, so the same difficulties weigh far more heavily on the public schools.

Readiness as a Systemic Condition

Taken together, the four themes point to one argument: readiness is not a quality that individual teachers either have or lack, but a condition produced by the system around them. A single gradient runs through every theme, with resources, confidence, training, and the capacity to meet new challenges all lining up with school type. Where one advantage appears, the others tend to follow, and the same is true of disadvantage. A well-qualified graduate placed in a school with no materials and no training may teach less effectively than a moderately qualified teacher who is well supported, which is why the policy focus needs to sit on conditions rather than on credentials alone.

This clustering is also why the reform risks widening the gap it hopes to close. A single mandate applied to unequal starting points tends to magnify the difference between them: the schools already best placed to comply gain the most, while those starting from almost nothing fall further behind, so advantage accumulates. There is a deeper tension as well. The Merdeka Curriculum's strengths, its student-centred teaching, formative assessment, and differentiation, each presume the resources, training, and small classes that the under-resourced schools do not have. The more progressive the pedagogy, the more capacity it quietly assumes, so without targeted support the curriculum's best features could themselves become a source of inequality. Children in well-resourced private schools look set to receive stronger English teaching than their public-school peers (Febriana et al., 2018), and the 2027 timeline sharpens the problem, because building resources, training, and qualified teachers takes years and the schools furthest behind have the least slack to catch up. On the evidence of these teachers, equity will not arrive on its own; it has to be designed into the rollout.

Limitations

This study has several limits. It draws on five teachers chosen purposively, so the findings describe their situation rather than the country as a whole and are not statistically generalisable. The participants came from two areas of Lampung Province, Bandar Lampung and Lampung Tengah; teachers in other provinces, and in more remote regions, may face different conditions. The data rest on what teachers said about themselves, without classroom observation to confirm their accounts. Because the interviews were conducted in Indonesian and then translated into English, some nuance may have shifted in translation. Finally, the study captures what teachers expected before 2027 rather than how the policy actually plays out, which later research can follow up once implementation begins.

CONCLUSION

As Indonesia prepares to make English compulsory in elementary schools, the picture in Lampung is uneven. The private-school teachers feel ready, supported by materials, experience, and regular training. The public-school teachers with English backgrounds said they were ready too, but only on the condition that resources and training improve, while the teacher without an English background did not feel ready at all and hoped a qualified colleague might join her. Many public schools approach 2027 without the resources, training, and support that effective teaching needs.

These differences put the curriculum's aim of fairer access at risk. A few priorities follow from the findings. Policymakers can invest in basic resources for public schools, set up free and ongoing training aimed specifically at elementary English teachers in several formats, clarify who is qualified to teach English at this

level and offer a certification path for those who are not, give context-sensitive guidance rather than one rule for every school, and consider a phased timeline with early support for schools that are behind. School leaders can review their own capacity, protect time and budget for English, and match teaching assignments to qualifications where they can. Teacher-education institutions can strengthen young-learner English methods in their programmes (Zein, 2015) and offer accessible upgrading for teachers already in service.

The problems are serious but not beyond reach. With steady investment and well-designed support, Indonesia can move toward a point where elementary students in every kind of school learn English from prepared, confident teachers. The five teachers here stand for many others who are willing to take on the change but need help to do it well, and their concerns deserve concrete answers before the deadline arrives.

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APPENDIX. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The protocol was administered in Indonesian; the English version is shown here. Questions were open-ended, and the interviewer used probes such as "Can you give an example?", "What do you mean by that?", and "Why do you think that is?" to follow up.

Opening

The interviewer explained the purpose of the study, confirmed consent and permission to record, and assured the teacher of confidentiality and the use of a pseudonym.

Part 1: Background

- Could you tell me about your teaching background and your training?
- How long have you been teaching, and which grades and subjects do you teach?
- At what grade does your school currently begin English instruction?

Part 2: Understanding of the Policy and Curriculum

- What do you understand about the plan to make English compulsory from 2027 under the Merdeka Curriculum?
- How and when did you first learn about it?
- How do you understand the curriculum's expectations for English at the elementary level?

Part 3: Readiness and Confidence

- How ready do you feel to teach compulsory English? Why?
- Which parts feel manageable to you, and which feel difficult?
- How confident do you feel about your own English and about teaching young children in particular?

Part 4: Resources and Institutional Support

- What materials, facilities, and technology do you have for teaching English?
- What support do you receive from your school's leadership?
- What is missing that you feel you would need?

Part 5: Professional Development

- What training related to English or the Merdeka Curriculum have you taken part in?
- How easy or difficult is it for you to access training?
- How do you try to learn or improve on your own?

Part 6: Expected Challenges

- What challenges do you expect once the policy begins in 2027?
- How do you think you will assess young learners' English?

- What concerns do you have about class size, mixed abilities, parents, or fitting English into the timetable?

Part 7: Suggestions

- What would help you most to prepare for the change?
- What would you want policymakers or your school to do?

Closing

The interviewer asked whether the teacher had anything to add and thanked them for taking part.