

PREPARING FOR COMPULSORY: CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS LOCAL CONTENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

English has long been taught as a local content subject in Indonesian elementary schools. It led to varied implementations across institutions. Starting in the 2027/2028 academic year, English will be a compulsory subject. Therefore, understanding current teaching practice is important to support the effective implementation of the new policy. The study aims to explore the challenges teachers face when teaching English as a local-content subject in Indonesian elementary schools. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed. The participants consisted of five elementary school teachers in Central Java, Indonesia. All of whom had experience teaching English as local content. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into their teaching practices and challenges. The findings indicate that teachers faced several challenges, including limited English proficiency, a lack of pedagogical training in teaching young learners, and insufficient teaching resources. In addition, limited instructional time and the status of English as a local content subject often leads to low prioritization within the school curriculum. Despite these challenges, most teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward the upcoming policy, although they express concerns about their readiness to implement it effectively. Further support in terms of professional development, adequate resources, and clear policy guidelines is necessary to ensure successful implementation.

Keywords: *English as a local content subject; elementary school teachers; teaching challenges*

Introduction

English is a global language that plays an important role in various fields. It functions as a *lingua franca*, facilitating communication, knowledge exchange, and international collaboration (Ummah et al., 2025). As globalization continues to grow, many countries have introduced English at the primary school level to prepare young learners for future academic and professional demands. The early acquisition of English is widely regarded as essential, as it enables learners to engage in broader communication networks and supports the development of basic communicative competence (Khasanah et al., 2025). The successful implementation

of English instruction for young learners, however, is strongly influenced by teacher quality, instructional resources, and institutional support (Alsuhairani et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, the position of English in elementary education has shifted across different curricula and educational policies. Since the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, English has been categorized as a local content subject and its implementation depends on each school's policy (Haryanto et al., 2018). Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 79 of 2014 concerning Local Content of the 2013 Curriculum allows schools to include

subjects based on their local needs and potential, including English. More recently, the government has planned to strengthen the position of English in elementary schools. Ministerial Regulation Number 12 of 2024 states that English may continue to be taught as local content before gradually becoming a compulsory subject in the 2027/2028 academic year. This policy is further reinforced by Ministerial Regulation Number 13 of 2025, which integrates English into the elementary school curriculum structure with a clearer allocation of instructional time.

The implementation of English instruction in elementary schools requires teachers who are linguistically and pedagogically prepared to teach young learners effectively. Cameron (2001) explained that teaching young learners requires teachers to possess both linguistic competence and appropriate pedagogical strategies adapted to children's developmental stages. In addition, Brown (2007) emphasized that effective language teaching depends on teachers' communicative competence and their ability to create meaningful classroom interaction.

Teaching English to young learners should emphasize meaningful interaction, contextual learning, and engaging activities, as Brewster et al. (2014) explain that effective English teaching for children should be based on active and enjoyable learning processes in which children learn through direct involvement in tasks and activities, playful experiences, meaningful contexts related to their daily lives, repetition that helps internalize language, and classroom routines that support language acquisition and create structured learning environments. It suggests that elementary English teachers need sufficient pedagogical competence to create meaningful and child-friendly learning environments.

However, the implementation of English teaching in Indonesian elementary schools still faces various challenges. Although some elementary English teachers come from English education programs, many teachers still have general elementary education backgrounds and limited formal preparation in English teaching. Diyanti et al. (2020) reported that elementary English teachers in Indonesia generally consist of specialist and generalist teachers, in which generalist teachers often experience difficulties related to English proficiency, instructional design, and classroom implementation. Teaching English in primary schools is often constrained by limited instructional time, insufficient teaching resources, unclear curriculum guidelines, and inadequate institutional support (Fatmasari et al., 2024; Haryanto et al., 2018; Kaltsum & Habiby, 2020). Moreover, teachers may face challenges related to classroom management, lack of pedagogical preparation, and difficulties in designing interactive learning activities for young learners (Noor et al., 2023; Sikki et al., 2013). These issues indicate that many schools may not yet be fully prepared for the implementation of compulsory English instruction.

Existing studies on English language teaching in primary education have mainly focused on teachers' beliefs, classroom practices, and students' learning outcomes. However, there is still limited attention to teachers' challenges in teaching English as a local content subject in relation to the upcoming compulsory English policy. Given the recent policy shift that will make English a compulsory subject in elementary schools starting from the 2027/2028 academic year, understanding teachers' current challenges and readiness becomes increasingly important. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by elementary school teachers in teaching English as a local

content subject and to examine their readiness toward the implementation of compulsory English instruction in Indonesian elementary schools.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' challenges in teaching English as a local content subject in elementary schools. Qualitative research is appropriate for understanding participants' experiences and perspectives in depth (Creswell, 2014). It focused on describing existing conditions, challenges, and teaching practices in the implementation of English as a local content subject.

The research was conducted in elementary schools in Central Java, which implement English as a local content subject. The participants of this study were five teachers who teach English. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they were considered to have relevant experience and knowledge related to the research topic, particularly in teaching English at the primary level.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview consisted of several guiding questions related to teachers' experiences, teaching practices, and challenges in implementing English as a local content subject. Each interview was conducted for approximately 30 minutes and was recorded to ensure data accuracy.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a flexible method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within the data. The analysis process included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and

verification. To ensure the validity of the data, this study applied member checking by confirming the interview results with the participants (Creswell, 2014).

Finding and Discussion

Teachers' English Competence and Confidence

The finding revealed differences in teachers' confidence and competence in teaching English. Teachers' confidence and competence were based on their educational background. Teachers with elementary education backgrounds tended to experience more difficulties in pronunciation, speaking, and classroom instruction, while teachers with English education backgrounds demonstrated higher confidence in teaching English. Several classroom teachers admitted that they were not fully confident in teaching English. P1 stated, *"I'm not confident,"* when asked about teaching English to elementary school. Even P1 was often helped by intern teachers when there were interns in school. P1 stated, *"Actually, the classroom teacher has the responsibility to teach English, but there are interns who are doing teaching practice, so the intern taught English"*. Similarly, P2 admitted to a lack of confidence in teaching English by saying *"Sometimes, I'm not confident."* P2 acknowledged having difficulty pronouncing certain words. To address the issue, P2 checked in internet for the correct pronunciation before teaching. While P3 perceived English proficiency as intermediate. P3 felt relatively confident in reading and listening skills. However, P3 admitted that still needed to improve speaking and writing. Despite this, P3 felt confident enough to teach because English used in classroom instruction was relatively simple, mainly for greetings and giving commands. *"I'm quite confident as I only use*

simple English mostly for greetings and commands,” said P3.

The findings also showed that teachers' educational backgrounds influenced their readiness to teach English. Teachers with English education backgrounds appeared more confident in classroom instruction. P5 had an English education background. P5 regularly used English for greeting, giving instructions, and doing classroom interaction in English. P4 was also from English education background. P4 described English teaching as enjoyable and expressed confidence in teaching young learners. P4 said, *“Confident in English lessons. The most fun because it's my world.”* It contrast suggests that teachers who received formal English education were more linguistically prepared to implement English instruction in elementary schools.

These findings support Cameron (2001), that teaching English to young learners requires sufficient linguistic competence and pedagogical preparation. The findings also indicate that the implementation of compulsory English instruction in elementary schools may face challenges if teachers are not adequately prepared through professional training and language development programs. These findings were also consistent with Diyanti et al. (2020), who found that generalist teachers in Indonesian elementary schools often struggle with English proficiency and English teaching preparation.

Students' Difficulty in Learning English

The finding revealed that students still had difficulties in learning English, particularly in vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, spelling, and sentence construction. These challenges were commonly reported by the participants and became one of the main

obstacles in English instruction at the elementary school level. Most teachers stated that students had limited English vocabulary, which affected their ability to understand and use English expressions. P1 explained that many students did not even know basic vocabulary. P2 also stated that children still had difficulty in learning English, especially since P2 teaches in a suburban area where children haven't been exposed to much English.

In addition, students often experienced confusion between English spelling and pronunciation. P4 stated that students found English difficult because *“English words have different spellings and pronunciations.”* Teachers also mentioned that students still had difficulties in arranging simple sentences and understanding classroom instructions delivered in English. Therefore, most teachers predominantly used Indonesian in classroom instruction since the students had limited understanding of English commands. P3 believed that elementary school students generally required a detailed comprehension of each word, and excessive use of English in teaching could lead to confusion. *“Teaching is mostly done in Indonesian because students don't yet understand commands in English. Teaching in English mostly just confuses them.”* Whereas, P5 applied bilingual instruction by combining Indonesian and English when giving directions in class, as this approach helped students better understand English expressions. These findings indicated that students' language readiness and literacy development remain important considerations in implementing English instruction at the elementary school level.

These findings were in line with Cameron (2001), who argues that young learners require meaningful, contextual, and developmentally appropriate language

learning experiences. Young learners tend to learn language gradually and often rely on concrete understanding before being able to produce language independently. It may explain why students experienced difficulties in vocabulary mastery, sentence construction, and understanding classroom instructions delivered fully in English.

In addition, the teachers' use of Indonesian and bilingual instruction reflects efforts to make classroom communication more comprehensible for students. Brown (2007) emphasized that meaningful classroom interaction and comprehensible input are important in supporting language learning, particularly for beginner learners. Therefore, the use of bilingual instruction may help students understand classroom instructions and reduce confusion during the learning process.

Nevertheless, all teachers applied various strategies to help students understand English more easily. These strategies included the use of games, songs, real objects, and other engaging activities to increase students' interest in learning English. P2 stated that students were enthusiastic when learning through songs and could understand the material more quickly. However, they still experienced difficulties when answering exercises independently. Similarly, P1 implemented game-based learning, particularly for lower-grade students. P4 also explained that younger learners were very excited when taught through songs. Meanwhile, P5 employed various teaching methods, such as interactive media, Canva-based materials, and games, adjusted to the students' age and learning characteristics.

These findings reflected the importance of interactive and enjoyable learning activities in teaching English to young learners. Brewster et al (2014) stated that effective

English teaching for young learners should be based on active and enjoyable learning processes. Children learn more effectively through learning by doing, where learners actively participate in tasks and classroom activities. This principle was reflected in teachers' use of games, songs, and interactive activities that encouraged students' participation during English lessons.

The findings also support the concept of learning through playing by Brewster et al (2014), which emphasized that playing was an essential component in maintaining children's motivation and engagement. The students' enthusiasm for songs and games, as reported by P1, P2, and P4, indicated that enjoyable activities helped create a more positive learning atmosphere for young learners. Furthermore, the teachers' use of real objects, interactive media, and Canva-based materials demonstrates the application of meaningful contexts in language learning, allowing students to connect English with familiar and relevant experiences.

Marginal Position of English as a Local Content Subject

The study found that English was still positioned as a secondary subject in elementary schools because of its status as a local content subject. It was allocated only two teaching hours per week. For some teachers, this allocation was considered insufficient because the material covered was quite extensive, especially for higher grades. P2 stated, *"Because the material is actually broad, if we think about it, the time is still insufficient."*

In addition, since English was only categorized as a local content subject, sometimes given less priority compared to compulsory subjects. Teachers tended to focus more on core subjects such as

Mathematics and Indonesian. As expressed by P2, *“Sometimes English is unintentionally overlooked because we are too focused on subjects like Mathematics and Indonesian.”*

Furthermore, the status of English in elementary schools as a local content subject influenced how schools prioritized English instruction. Some schools implemented English starting from the third grade. But it was also implemented in the first grade in other schools. In P4’s school, English had been introduced from lower grades, starting from first grade. However, English for lower-grade students was not included in the report card. As a result, the subject was sometimes considered less important compared to other subjects. P4 stated, *“I once had to prioritize teaching other subjects, so English was not taught because it was not included in the report card. However, I still conducted tests. Sometimes the English lesson had to be skipped and replaced with another subject.”*

The current findings parallel those reported by Diyanti et al. (2020) that English in Indonesian elementary schools occupied a marginal position due to its unclear policy status and its classification as a local content subject. Similarly, Kaltsum and Habiby (2020) found that English as a local content subject frequently receives limited institutional attention, resulting in insufficient instructional support and inconsistent classroom implementation. Therefore, the transition of English from a local content subject to a compulsory subject may require clearer policy direction, stronger institutional commitment, and more consistent instructional support in elementary schools.

Insufficient Institutional Support

The data indicated that insufficient institutional support remained one of the

major challenges in implementing English instruction in elementary schools. Teachers reported limitations related to professional development opportunities, teaching resources, technological facilities, and school support for English learning.

Several participants explained that opportunities for English teaching training and workshops were still limited and unevenly distributed. P1 stated that English training programs were conducted only a few times each year, and not all teachers were able to participate directly. Usually, only representatives from each teacher cluster attended the training and later shared the information with other teachers in their groups. P1 explained, *“Several years ago, there was English training, but only representatives from each cluster could participate. Later, those representatives shared the materials with the other teachers in the cluster.”* Similarly, P2 mentioned that the training programs were usually attended by representatives from one district or teacher cluster, who were then expected to disseminate the knowledge to other teachers.

P4 also described a workshop program designed for selected schools, particularly to prepare classroom teachers to teach English. According to P4, the program was likely intended to support the government’s plan to make English a compulsory subject in elementary schools. Meanwhile, P3 reported currently participating in a six-month English training program conducted through both online and offline sessions. The training focused on preparing teachers for the possible implementation of English as a compulsory subject in schools.

The findings resonated with Diyanti et al. (2020), who reported that primary English teachers in Indonesia frequently experience unequal professional support and limited

access to structured training programs. Although training programs related to English instruction have been conducted, access to these programs often depends on representative systems in which only selected teachers participate directly and later disseminate the information to other teachers. This condition may affect the effectiveness of teacher development because not all teachers receive equal opportunities for direct training and practical experience.

Diyanti (2020) also reported that limited facilities and unequal professional support remain significant challenges in English teaching at the elementary level in Indonesia. The recent study further indicated that limited learning infrastructure and instructional resources also affected the implementation of English instruction in elementary schools. Several participants reported limited access to teaching media and technological facilities to support classroom learning. P5 stated, *“For example, English-based board games, flashcards, and other learning tools are needed. If I have to make them myself, it can be difficult. Digital or application-based media are easier now because there are many ways to create them. However, for physical materials, the school usually needs to provide them first, and I think this is something that still needs improvement.”*

Brewster (2014) explained that effective English teaching for children should involve interactive activities and supportive learning environments that help maintain students' motivation and participation. The limited availability of teaching media and technological facilities found in this study may also affect teachers' ability to create engaging and developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young learners. Therefore, preparing for compulsory English instruction requires not only teacher

readiness but also adequate institutional and infrastructural support.

Teachers' Attitudes toward Compulsory English Policy

The study found that all participants showed positive attitudes toward the implementation of compulsory English instruction in elementary schools. Teachers generally believed that English is important for students' future academic needs, global communication, and preparation for higher levels of education.

Several participants stated that introducing English at the elementary level could help students become more familiar with English vocabulary and expressions from an early age. P1 believed that English should be made a compulsory subject because English proficiency is considered important for students' future needs. However, P1 also emphasized that many elementary school teachers still needed further preparation and training to teach English effectively. P1 stated, *“Actually, English should indeed be compulsory because it is important for future work and communication. However, at the elementary school level, many teachers still need more learning and preparation.”*

P2 was aware of the discourse regarding the plan to make English a compulsory subject in elementary schools starting from the 2027/2028 academic year. However, P2 stated that there had not yet been clear socialization or technical guidelines regarding its implementation. P2 explained that the information was still limited to policy discourse within the curriculum framework and had not yet been formally communicated to teachers in detail. P2 stated, *“In the Merdeka Curriculum, English is planned to become a compulsory subject in elementary schools, but the technical implementation has*

not been explained yet. I have not heard any official socialization about it." P2 also mentioned that schools usually receive curriculum-related information through workshops conducted at the beginning of the academic year. Therefore, teachers expected that further explanation regarding the compulsory English policy would likely be delivered during future curriculum workshops.

P3 expressed strong support for the plan to make English a compulsory subject in elementary schools by saying, *"I strongly support the policy because English is a global competence. Wherever we go, English is commonly used for communication."* However, P3 emphasized that the implementation should be accompanied by additional instructional hours, standardized curriculum guidelines, and adequate support systems. P3 believed that these aspects were important to ensure that English teaching could be implemented optimally. P3 further explained that although the textbooks used in schools were generally the same and provided by the Ministry of Education, schools still differed in many aspects of implementation. Teachers often had to independently prepare assessments, exercises, teaching media, and other instructional materials because English had previously been treated only as a local content subject.

Although the government had started providing training programs for classroom teachers to teach English, this issue was one of the main challenges in implementing English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools. P4 believed that English in elementary schools should ideally be taught by teachers with an English education background. P4 explained that classroom teachers sometimes still experienced difficulties understanding certain English

terms or expressions. P4 stated, *"Some classroom teachers often ask me about the meaning of certain sentences because they do not really understand them."* It indicated that some teachers still had a limited understanding of English.

Similarly, P5 generally supported the policy of making English a compulsory subject in elementary schools. Drawing from previous teaching experience at the junior high school level, P5 observed a significant difference between students who had learned English in elementary school and those who had not. P5 stated, *"I can clearly see the difference between students who had learned English before and those who had never learned it at all. Students who were introduced to English in elementary school could follow lessons much better in junior high school."*

Nevertheless, P5 also raised concerns regarding teacher preparation. In particular, P5 questioned the effectiveness of short-term training programs designed to prepare classroom teachers without an English education background to teach English. P5 explained that becoming an English teacher required years of study and practice, especially in mastering the four language skills. *"I studied for four years to be able to teach English, while some training programs for classroom teachers only last around three months. I wonder whether that would really be effective."*

Furthermore, P5 emphasized the importance of accurate pronunciation in teaching young learners since incorrect pronunciation provided by teachers could become deeply embedded in children's long-term memory and would later be difficult to correct. P5 explained that even English teachers sometimes still make pronunciation mistakes. It raised concerns about the readiness of non-

English-background teachers to teach the subject effectively.

Cameron (2001) emphasized that teaching young learners requires both linguistic competence and appropriate pedagogical preparation. In addition, Brown (2007) argued that the importance of teacher competence in creating meaningful classroom interaction and effective language learning experiences. The concerns regarding pronunciation and language mastery raised by P5 also indicated the importance of adequate language competence in teaching young learners. Since children are still developing their basic language knowledge, inaccurate pronunciation and inappropriate language exposure may influence students' long-term language acquisition. In this regard, Brewster et al. (2014) explained that young learners require structured, meaningful, and accurate language input supported by appropriate classroom interaction and learning activities. Therefore, although teachers positively responded to the compulsory English policy, the findings suggest that successful implementation may depend not only on policy changes but also on sustainable teacher development, adequate institutional support, and careful preparation for classroom practice.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by elementary school teachers in teaching English as a local content subject and examined readiness toward the implementation of compulsory English instruction in elementary schools. The findings showed that English teaching at the elementary level is still influenced by various challenges related to teacher competence, students' language readiness, the marginal position of English as a local content subject, and insufficient institutional support.

Teachers with general elementary education backgrounds tended to experience more difficulties in English proficiency and instructional confidence compared to teachers with English education backgrounds. In addition, students still faced challenges in vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, spelling, and understanding classroom instructions delivered in English.

The study also found that English often received limited instructional attention because of its status as a local content subject. Limited training opportunities, unequal professional development access, and insufficient learning facilities further affected the implementation of English instruction in schools. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrated various efforts to create engaging English learning environments through games, songs, visual media, bilingual instruction, and interactive learning activities appropriate for young learners.

Despite these challenges, all participants showed positive attitudes toward the implementation of compulsory English instruction in elementary schools. Teachers believed that English is important for students' future educational and communicative needs and supported the introduction of English from an early age. However, they also emphasized that successful implementation requires adequate teacher preparation, clearer curriculum guidelines, sufficient instructional time, and stronger institutional support.

Therefore, this study suggests that the implementation of compulsory English instruction in elementary schools should be accompanied by sustainable professional development programs, equitable teacher training opportunities, adequate instructional resources, and clearer policy guidance. Future policies should also consider the

readiness levels among teachers, particularly generalist classroom teachers.

In addition, this study was conducted with a limited number of participants from several elementary schools. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the context of this study. Future research may involve broader participant groups from different educational settings to provide more comprehensive insights into the implementation of compulsory English instruction in elementary schools. Further studies may also explore students' perspectives, classroom implementation practices, or the effectiveness of teacher training programs related to compulsory English instruction in elementary schools.

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