

**PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ON THE URGENCY OF ENGLISH AS
A MANDATORY SUBJECT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITHIN THE
MERDEKA CURRICULUM**

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ABSTRACT

The reimplementation of English as a subject in Indonesian primary schools has become a key topic of discussion following the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This study explores pre-service English teachers' beliefs regarding the urgency of English as a mandatory subject in primary schools (SD/MI). It focuses on their perceptions of the importance of English, their support for the reimplementation policy, and their personal as well as institutional readiness for its application. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and written reflections from five pre-service teachers enrolled in the English Education Program at Universitas Jambi. The data were analyzed thematically to identify emerging patterns and underlying reasons behind the participants' beliefs. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for teacher education programs, curriculum designers, and policymakers, emphasizing the need to align teacher preparation with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum and the broader goal of strengthening English education at the primary level.

Keywords: English Education, Merdeka Curriculum, Pre-service Teachers, Primary School, Teacher Beliefs

INTRODUCTION

English is one of the key 21st-century skills considered essential in shaping students' global competitiveness. In Indonesia, the teaching of English at the elementary school level (SD/MI) was once removed from the list of compulsory subjects in the 2013 Curriculum and replaced with an emphasis on Indonesian literacy and thematic learning. However, The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum grants greater autonomy to educational institutions, allowing them to develop their own operational school curricula. This includes the potential to teach English either as a local content subject or as a compulsory subject starting in the 2027/2028 academic year (Mulyadin et al., 2023; Reza, 2023).

The reimplementation of English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools (SD/MI) has received various responses from education practitioners. Teachers who have experience teaching at the elementary level as well as pre-service teachers (teacher education students) hold differing views regarding the urgency, readiness, and effectiveness of this policy (Nurzen, 2022). Therefore, a comprehensive study is needed—not only to explore the perspectives of active teachers but also to involve pre-service teachers, who will become key actors in the implementation of future policies.

Despite the autonomy granted by the Merdeka Curriculum, not all elementary institutions are equally positioned to deliver English instruction efficiently. Challenges including inadequate facilities, a scarcity of qualified English teachers, and insufficient professional development opportunities particularly impact schools located in remote areas (Syarifuddin & Hz, 2023), 2023). This reality underscores the critical role that the perceptions and readiness of both in-service and pre-service teachers play in successfully translating educational policy into classroom

practices, as these educators serve as essential connectors between curriculum frameworks and instructional reality.

Furthermore, the perspectives of pre-service teachers as the next generation of educators need to be considered, as they are being trained in higher education environments that are adapting to the latest curriculum developments. Their understanding and belief in the importance of English at the elementary level (SD/MI) reflect how well university curricula have prepared them for real-world teaching challenges. This study, therefore, focuses on exploring pre-service teachers' perceptions to provide insights and evidence-based recommendations for improving teacher education programs and policymaking related to English language instruction at the elementary level. Research has indicated that pre-service teachers' beliefs about their education, particularly concerning curriculum content and pedagogical strategies, significantly influence their teaching efficacy and attitudes towards language instruction, underscoring the necessity to align teacher training with contemporary educational demands (Reynolds et al., 2021).

The research problem of this study is formulated as follows: What are the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the urgency of English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum?.

METHODS

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of five pre-service English teachers enrolled in the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Jambi. They were selected using purposive sampling, with additional consideration of accessibility (convenience sampling), as all participants had an academic connection with the researcher, either as academic advisees or as students supervised during *School Field Experience (Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan, PLP)*. This relationship facilitated communication and ensured active participation throughout the research process.

The participants were chosen based on criteria aligned with the study's objectives: (a) they were in their final years of study (minimum sixth semester), (b) they had completed key courses such as curriculum studies, English language teaching methodology, lesson planning, and teaching practicum, and (c) they were either currently participating in or had completed PLP. Four participants were engaged in PLP during data collection, while one had already completed the program.

Although most participants had not yet taught directly at the elementary level, their PLP experiences provided early exposure to real school contexts, allowing them to observe teaching practices and curriculum implementation. These experiences were considered sufficient to represent pre-service teachers' developing beliefs and professional readiness in relation to the policy of reintroducing English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level.

This participant group represents pre-service English teachers who are academically and professionally in the process of forming their educational identity and are potential future implementers of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. Their reflections and perceptions provide valuable insight into how future educators understand the urgency of English in Indonesian basic education.

Instruments

In accordance with qualitative research principles, the researcher served as the main instrument (Creswell, 2013), responsible for designing interview questions, guiding data collection, interpreting findings, and validating data through triangulation.

Two supporting instruments were also used:

1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide: This included open-ended questions exploring participants' experiences learning English, their views on the urgency of English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools, and their reflections on the *Merdeka Curriculum*.
2. Reflective Writing Guide: This contained prompts for participants to write about their personal English learning experiences from elementary school through university and to express their thoughts on the significance of English instruction at the elementary level.

Both instruments were developed based on the research focus and applied flexibly to allow participants to express their ideas freely and deeply.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two main techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews and reflective writing analysis. Individual interviews were conducted with the five pre-service English teachers. The interviews focused on three key aspects:

1. Participants' perceptions of the importance of English at the elementary level,
2. Teachers' readiness to teach English under the *Merdeka Curriculum*, and
3. Personal and institutional factors influencing their professional beliefs.

Each interview was audio-recorded (with participant consent) and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to interviews, participants were asked to produce reflective essays describing their English learning experiences and their views on English as a compulsory subject in elementary school. These reflections provided complementary data that captured participants' inner thoughts, emotions, and self-awareness that might not have emerged in the interviews. The combination of interview and reflective writing data allowed the researcher to conduct methodological triangulation, enhancing the depth and validity of the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data, comprising interview transcripts and reflective writings, were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted in six systematic phases:

1. Familiarization: Reading and re-reading the data to become immersed and gain a general understanding.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Highlighting and labeling meaningful units or patterns in the data.
3. Searching for Themes: Grouping related codes into potential themes reflecting broader meanings.
4. Reviewing Themes: Refining and validating themes to ensure they accurately represented the data.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Clearly identifying the essence of each theme and subtheme.
6. Producing the Report: Integrating and interpreting themes in relation to the research questions and literature.

To ensure trustworthiness, several validation strategies were applied:

- Source triangulation between interview and reflective data to confirm consistency.
- Member checking, where participants reviewed transcriptions and interpretations to verify accuracy.
- Researcher reflexivity to minimize personal bias and ensure confirmability.

This analytical process provided a rich and credible understanding of how pre-service English teachers perceive the urgency of English as a compulsory subject in elementary education under the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Beliefs About the Urgency of English in Primary Education

Based on the thematic analysis, all five pre-service English teachers expressed a strong belief that English should be introduced from an early age, emphasizing that the elementary level is the *golden age* for language learning. Participants such as C and M asserted that young learners possess natural linguistic receptiveness that allows them to absorb vocabulary and pronunciation more effectively. As C stated:

“During elementary school, it is the golden age... if they are taught English from that stage, they will not find it difficult later on.”

Similarly, B emphasized the developmental and practical advantages of early English learning:

“At the elementary level, children can easily adapt to English, so it should be introduced early.”

This belief aligns with Ushioda (2017) who argues that the earlier children are exposed to a second language, the more naturally they acquire communicative competence. The participants' reasoning also mirrors the 21st-century skills framework, which identifies multilingual proficiency as a foundation for global competitiveness (Ushioda, 2017; Nansubuga et al., 2024; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

However, some differences emerged. A viewed English as *important but not yet compulsory*, believing that elementary students should first master basic literacy and numeracy. He expressed that:

“English is not the mother tongue, so it should not be compulsory at the elementary level.”

This contrasts with N, who contended that making English optional would only increase learning disparities between students who have early exposure and those who do not:

“If it is only an elective, many students will avoid it because they think it’s difficult.”

These contrasting perspectives reflect what Pajares (1992) termed the *belief-behavior gap*, where teacher beliefs may align or conflict with broader policy expectations. The majority's conviction that early English instruction is crucial underscores a growing consensus among future educators that the Merdeka Curriculum should prioritize foundational language exposure.

Beliefs About the Implementation of the 2027 Mandatory English Policy

All participants expressed general support for the government's 2027 policy to make English a compulsory subject in primary schools. However, their support was conditional—based on adequate teacher preparation and resource allocation. N remarked:

“I agree, but maybe it’s a bit late. It should have been implemented long ago.”

Likewise, M noted that while she found the policy highly beneficial, its success would depend on regional readiness:

“The policy is very good, but it will be hard for children in rural areas because they rarely get exposure to English.”

Such findings echo Borg's (2019) claim that teachers' beliefs about policy effectiveness are shaped by contextual constraints. Arif et al., (2024) report similar contextual constraints—uneven teacher preparedness, limited school–university coordination, and variable local support—that limit equitable implementation of Merdeka's reintroduction of English, while studies of rural and disadvantaged EL provision document shortages of qualified teachers and resources that compound such inequities (Tra et al., 2022; (Arif et al., 2024). The participants were acutely aware of unequal readiness between urban and rural schools, with B highlighting that:

“Even at the junior high level, schools are not fully ready; how can elementary schools be?”

In the broader discussion, these views demonstrate a practical understanding among pre-service teachers that policy success requires more than curriculum design—it depends on equitable implementation, qualified teachers, and community support (Warren-Lee et al., 2024). The participants' reflections suggest an alignment with a *critical pragmatic stance*; they support reform but question systemic capacity.

Beliefs About Teacher Readiness and Personal Preparedness

A strong and recurring theme was the perceived lack of readiness among both in-service and pre-service teachers. All participants admitted that while they had adequate theoretical knowledge, they lacked hands-on experience and pedagogical strategies suited for young learners. N candidly stated:

“Maybe I have enough knowledge, but I am not yet confident in handling elementary students.”

B echoed this concern, highlighting the emotional challenge teachers might face when students fail to understand lessons:

“It can be stressful... when the children don’t understand, it affects our morale as teachers.”

These findings resonate with Güngör et al. (2019) assertion that novice teachers often experience *reality shock* when transitioning from theory to practice. The participants also linked their lack of confidence to the limited practical training in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) within their university programs. While some, such as E and N, had taken TEYL courses, they found them insufficiently practical:

“We already have TEYL, but there’s no real practice in primary schools.” (N)

This sentiment reinforces that teacher education programs in EFL contexts often neglect early-age pedagogy. The participants’ reflections thus call for greater integration of practical school-based experiences to bridge the gap between university training and classroom realities (Qin & Villarreal, 2022).

Beliefs About the Merdeka Curriculum and Classroom Flexibility

Regarding the *Merdeka Curriculum*, participants generally appreciated its emphasis on flexibility and contextualization, but they expressed concerns about its lack of structure. They believed that while flexibility allows creativity, it can also cause confusion among teachers who lack experience or training. N observed:

“If teachers don’t really understand the concept of flexibility, they can get confused about where to start.”

Similarly, B critiqued the limited instructional time allocated for English, arguing that two hours per week was inadequate:

“Sometimes the two hours are spent on attendance and preparation, so the main lesson is not delivered effectively.”

These findings suggest that flexible curricula demand high teacher competence to ensure coherence in implementation. M’s interpretation of flexibility was simpler—she saw it as “adjusting to school conditions,” showing that many pre-service teachers conceptualize curricular flexibility pragmatically rather than pedagogically. The participants’ mixed perceptions reveal an awareness of curriculum innovation but uncertainty about its practical execution. This indicates a need for clearer operational guidelines and mentoring mechanisms within the Merdeka framework (Prahastina et al., 2024).

Beliefs About Educational Equity and Institutional Roles

A major cross-cutting theme in all interviews was the issue of inequality between urban and rural schools. Every participant noted that English exposure, facilities, and qualified teachers were significantly better in urban areas. E emphasized:

“In cities, it will work faster, but in villages, it will take longer because the facilities are lacking.”

B added:

“In villages, there are fewer teachers and almost no equipment.”

The participants’ recognition of this systemic inequity indicates that language-in-education policy must explicitly target rural–urban disparities through measures such as improved teacher preparation, equitable resource allocation, and localized implementation supports (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). They collectively viewed teacher quality as the most critical factor for successful implementation, even more so than facilities. As articulated:

“The teacher is the key; facilities only support.”

Moreover, participants highlighted the role of universities in shaping teacher readiness. They felt that English Education Departments should better align their curricula with national policy priorities. A suggested:

“It should involve collaboration between the campus, the government, and even international partners to prepare competent teachers.”

This echoes Zeichner (2009) and Napolitan et al. (2019), who found that collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions, schools, and policy actors significantly enhance teacher preparedness by aligning campus coursework with school-based practice and by fostering community-engaged, practice-oriented teacher development.

Beliefs About Training, Policy Support, and Future Expectations

Across all participants, there was a shared optimism toward the potential success of the 2027 English policy, provided that adequate support systems are established. They called for continuous teacher training, equitable resource distribution, and professional certification programs. B explicitly recommended:

“*There should be more structured and in-depth training for primary English teachers.*”

Similarly, Nabila emphasized practical exposure:

“*We hope for more field practice with supervision from lecturers.*”

Participants also stressed the importance of fair compensation and recognition for English teachers, particularly in rural areas, to attract qualified educators. Their forward-looking recommendations illustrate what Borg (2019) terms *beliefs as future-oriented cognition*—beliefs that guide expectations and desired systemic change.

Collectively, their insights reveal a balanced understanding of both pedagogical ideals and policy pragmatism. They envision English education reform not merely as curriculum adjustment but as a long-term national strategy for educational equity and teacher empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the beliefs of pre-service English teachers regarding the urgency of English as a compulsory subject in Indonesian primary schools within the framework of the *Merdeka Curriculum*. The findings revealed that participants strongly supported early English instruction, viewing it as essential for building communicative competence and preparing students for global competitiveness. Their beliefs reflected a clear awareness that the elementary level is a critical period for language acquisition, yet they also emphasized that successful policy implementation depends on teacher readiness, institutional capacity, and equitable resource distribution across regions.

The participants’ insights demonstrated both idealism and pragmatism. On one hand, they acknowledged the transformative potential of English education; on the other, they recognized persistent challenges such as limited training, unequal school facilities, and the lack of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas. Their nuanced perspectives suggest that future educators are not only aware of pedagogical principles but also sensitive to the systemic realities shaping language education in Indonesia.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher cognition and educational reform, providing empirical evidence from the perspective of pre-service teachers—a group often overlooked in policy discourse. Their beliefs serve as a valuable indicator of how future teachers may respond to and enact the *Merdeka Curriculum’s* policy of English reimplementation in 2027.

Value of the Study

The value of this research lies in its contextual and forward-looking insights into teacher belief formation amid national curriculum transformation. It highlights the critical role of pre-service teachers as *future policy implementers* whose perceptions and professional identities will shape the long-term success of the English language policy. By documenting their reflections, the study offers policymakers, universities, and teacher educators a deeper understanding of how beliefs, readiness, and pedagogical confidence interact in the process of curriculum reform.

Moreover, this research contributes conceptually to the field of language teacher education by illustrating how beliefs act as cognitive filters that mediate between institutional expectations and classroom realities. The results reaffirm that sustainable educational change requires not only policy *innovation* but also the empowerment of teachers through ongoing professional development and reflective practice.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the *sample* size was limited to five pre-service teachers from a single university, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research involving a larger and more diverse

sample could provide a broader representation of teacher beliefs across different regions and institutions.

Second, the data relied primarily on interviews and reflective writings, which capture participants' self-reported beliefs but not their actual classroom practices. Observational data or longitudinal *tracking* could provide a more holistic understanding of how beliefs translate into teaching behavior during practicum or early professional years.

Third, because the participants were drawn from the researcher's academic network, *positionality* bias may have influenced participants' responses despite efforts to maintain neutrality and reflexivity. Future studies could involve independent interviewers or anonymous written surveys to minimize such bias.

Finally, this study *focused* solely on pre-service teachers. Including active primary school teachers *and* education policymakers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the alignment, or mismatch, between belief, policy, and practice.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations, several directions for future research are recommended:

1. Expand the participant scope to include both pre-service and in-service teachers across urban and rural contexts to explore how institutional and environmental factors shape beliefs and practices.
2. Conduct longitudinal studies following pre-service teachers into their early teaching careers to examine how beliefs evolve during the transition from training to practice.
3. Integrate classroom observation and teaching simulation to analyze the relationship between teachers stated beliefs and their pedagogical actions.
4. Investigate institutional readiness—including curriculum alignment, resource provision, and school leadership—to assess systemic factors affecting English reimplementation in primary education.
5. Develop intervention studies that evaluate the impact of targeted training programs, such as Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) modules or reflective teaching workshops, on improving teacher confidence and curriculum literacy.

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