

PEDAGOGICAL ALIGNMENT AND TEACHER AGENCY IN AN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH PROGRAM

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Abstract: The landscape of English teaching in Indonesian primary schools is undergoing a transition from an elective to a mandatory subject. The success of this shift depends on alignment between institutional goals and classroom practices. This study explores how a primary school English teacher interprets school policy and translates it into pedagogical action. It examines the synchronization of school expectations with classroom instruction, teacher initiatives, and the collaborative ecosystem within the school. This research uses a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with an English teacher at SDN Babadan 01, focusing on alignment, capability, and engagement. The findings show that despite the absence of formal written policy, a shared understanding exists among the teacher, school committee, and leadership. The teacher demonstrates strong agency by implementing fun learning strategies, including singing, role-play, and digital tools to build confidence and speaking habits. Engagement is also visible through the *Kelas Plus* program and support from homeroom teachers. However, limited instructional time and varied student abilities remain challenges. The study highlights the importance of teacher professionalism and institutional support during curriculum transitions.

Keywords: English language teaching; pedagogical alignment; primary education; teacher agency

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of English language teaching is closely related to teachers' professional knowledge and cognitive frameworks. Drawing on the concept of teacher cognition, professional experiences, classroom practices, and contextual factors play a central role in shaping classroom practices (Borg, 2003). Similarly, Shulman's framework of teacher knowledge highlights the importance of integrating content knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge; curriculum knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values, as key components of effective teaching (Shulman, 1987).

Cognition and knowledge play a significant role in shaping teacher agency. According to Priestley et al. (2015) and Toom et al. (2015), as cited in Chen (2024), teacher agency refers to teachers' capacity to make intentional and informed decisions in their work environment. It is shaped by a complex interaction of personal beliefs, prior experiences, aspirations, knowledge, and surrounding contexts. In the context of primary education, teacher agency becomes even more crucial, as young learners require appropriate, engaging, and meaningful language learning experiences. However, the ideal profile of an effective English teacher often contrasts with the realities found in many primary school settings, particularly where teachers may lack formal training in English language education (Copland et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, the status of English in primary schools has traditionally been positioned as an elective subject, resulting in diverse implementation across institutions (Meisani et al., 2020). However, recent policy directions indicate a transition toward making English a mandatory subject by 2027 (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah [Kemendikdasmen], 2025). This shift is accompanied by a structural change in which the responsibility for teaching English is increasingly assigned to non-specialist teachers, particularly homeroom teachers without formal educational backgrounds in English. Consequently, a tension emerges between policy expectations and classroom realities, especially in how teachers interpret and enact curricular goals.

Amid this transition, an important yet underexplored phenomenon emerges. While policy trends emphasize the role of generalist teachers, some schools continue to maintain specialist English teachers as part of their institutional practice. This creates a space of pedagogical negotiation, where specialist teachers operate within a system that is gradually shifting away from their formal role. Existing research on primary English language teaching has focused on how non-specialist teachers address the challenges of teaching English in primary schools (Widagsa et al., 2025; Matsumura & Hinoki, 2025).

This leaves a gap in understanding how specialist teachers navigate their roles within changing policy environments, particularly in Indonesian context.

This study addresses this gap by examining the readiness of a specialist English teacher in a primary school context undergoing curricular transition. Readiness in this study is conceptualized as condition in which teachers are prepared to undergo change (Lynch & Smith, 2016). In the context of English language teaching, teacher readiness is not solely measured by language proficiency, but also by the extent to which teachers understand policy directions (Alignment), possess the necessary skills and resources to implement instruction (Capability), and demonstrate commitment and engagement in supporting the program (Engagement). These three aspects are outlined in the ACE model developed by Schiemann (2012) to assess the readiness of organizations and individuals in facing change.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how a specialist English teacher interprets, negotiates, and enacts their role in response to shifting curricular demands, with particular attention to alignment, capability, and engagement. By doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher agency and professionalism in times of educational transition, offering insights for both policy implementation and school-level decision-making in primary English education.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach by conducting a semi-structured interview with a specialist English teacher at SDN Babadan 01 in Blitar, East Java Province. The teacher began her teaching career in May 2024 and was selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria: (a) she teaches English at a public primary school; (b) she holds a degree in English education; (c) she is responsible for teaching English across grade levels; and (d) she voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Prior to data collection, the teacher was provided with an informed consent outlining the description and procedures of the study and was given time to consider her involvement and raise any questions before signing the informed consent. To ensure confidentiality, the teacher is referred to as Ms. NA throughout the study.

A semi-structured interview was employed to explore the teacher's prior experiences, current practices, and future aspirations, with a focus on the dimensions of alignment, capability, and engagement. The interview was conducted face-to-face in Indonesian and took place in the teachers' room, lasting approximately 60 minutes. The teacher was provided with the interview protocol in advance to allow time for preparation and to encourage more detailed responses. The interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed to capture the details of the conversation. An AI-powered transcription tool, TurboScribe, was used to assist with the transcription process. To ensure accuracy, the participant was invited to review and verify the transcript.

This study employed thematic analysis as theorized by Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The process followed six key phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. To begin, the researchers engaged in familiarization by reading and rereading the interview transcripts in Indonesian, ensuring a deep understanding of the content and context. This stage allowed the researchers to immerse themselves in the data, noting initial impressions and recurring ideas.

Subsequently, the process of generating initial codes was undertaken, where meaningful segments of the transcripts were highlighted and labeled in English to capture the essence of participants' responses. These codes were then organized into broader categories during the theme-searching phase, guided by the grand theoretical framework of Alignment, Capability,

and Engagement. The reviewing stage involved refining these categories to ensure coherence and distinctiveness, followed by defining and naming themes to articulate their scope and focus. Finally, the analysis culminated in writing the report, where themes were presented with supporting evidence from direct quotes that were translated into English to enhance readability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, organized around the three overarching themes of alignment, capability, and engagement, which together capture the readiness of English specialist teachers to teach English in primary schools. The analysis draws on interview data with Ms. NA, an English teacher at SD Babadan 01, and highlights how her experiences reflect broader issues in the current educational landscape. As Indonesia prepares for the 2027 curriculum transition, where English will shift from an elective to a mandatory subject, the role of specialist teachers becomes increasingly significant. Their expertise in language, pedagogy, and professional agency positions them as key actors in ensuring that English instruction is not only implemented but also meaningful, effective, and sustainable. The following subsections discuss each theme in detail, illustrating both the strengths and challenges that shape teacher readiness in this context.

Alignment

The theme of alignment in this study refers to the consistency between school policies, teacher practices, and shared goals in preparing primary school students for English learning amid the curriculum transition. The interview with Ms. NA reveals that, although formal documentation is lacking, there is a strong shared vision among teachers and the school community regarding the importance of introducing English early. She explained that the purpose of English instruction is to equip students with basic skills while simultaneously fostering confidence and positive attitudes toward the language: *“I understand that the development of English learning in this school is aimed at equipping students from an early age with basic English skills, while at the same time fostering courage and a positive attitude toward the language.”* This illustrates how alignment is achieved through collective understanding rather than written policy.

Despite this shared vision, Ms. NA acknowledged that the school does not provide formal documents outlining these goals. As she noted, *“The goals are limited to our shared understanding.”* The absence of written guidelines suggests that alignment relies heavily on informal agreements and shared perceptions. While this has worked in practice, it may present challenges during the upcoming transition to mandatory English in 2027, when clearer policy frameworks will be required to ensure consistency across schools.

In terms of classroom implementation, Ms. NA emphasized confidence-building and repeated exposure through listening and speaking activities. She highlighted the role of the *Kelas Plus* program, which provides supplementary English instruction focusing on pronunciation and speaking practice: *“In the Kelas Plus program, the focus is on pronunciation and speaking. The foundation is taught first, followed by practice.”* The school supports these practices by granting teachers autonomy, providing equal access to facilities, and ensuring structured scheduling. These measures demonstrate institutional support for alignment between goals and classroom practice.

Collective support from colleagues and administrators further reinforces alignment. Ms. NA observed that the school continues to maintain English specialist teachers, reflecting a shared perception of English as an essential subject: *“It is certainly very well aligned, as evidenced by the continued appointment of specialist English teachers to teach the subject.”* This indicates that alignment is not only present at the classroom level but also embedded in institutional decisions about staffing and subject prioritization.

Nevertheless, challenges remain in sustaining alignment. Ms. NA identified three main obstacles: limited instructional time, diverse student abilities, and the evolving demands of the curriculum. She explained that the 70-minute sessions are insufficient, particularly for upper-grade students, and that varying levels of prior knowledge require constant adaptation. In addition, the continuous development of the curriculum places additional burdens on teachers to keep pace with new requirements. These factors complicate the process of maintaining alignment between goals, practice, and policy.

Overall, the findings suggest that alignment in this context is characterized by a strong shared vision and supportive practices but weakened by the absence of formal documentation and structural constraints. As the transition to mandatory English approaches, strengthening policy frameworks and addressing resource limitations will be critical to sustaining alignment and ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to meet the new demands.

Capability

The theme of capability in this study encompasses both English language proficiency and pedagogical competence, which together determine teachers' readiness to deliver effective English instruction at the primary level. Ms. NA reflected on her own English proficiency, describing it as sufficient but still requiring continuous development: *“In terms of English competence, it may be considered sufficient, but I must continue to develop and practice consistently.”* She positioned herself at the intermediate level, acknowledging that she has not pursued formal certification but engages in self-study, reading journals, and attending webinars. This highlights a reliance on informal professional development rather than structured qualifications, which may limit confidence but also demonstrates initiative in maintaining competence.

Pedagogical capability emerged as equally important. Ms. NA emphasized that English instruction for young learners must be contextual, practical, and above all enjoyable: *“So far, English learning should be more contextual. It involves a great deal of practice, and most importantly, it should be enjoyable.”* She observed that many students are initially fearful of making mistakes, but she counters this by encouraging practice, building confidence, and framing English as part of everyday life. This approach reflects an understanding of child-centered pedagogy, where reducing anxiety and fostering enjoyment are central to capability.

Her planning and classroom execution further illustrate pedagogical competence. For example, when teaching expressions of likes and dislikes, she connected the material to students’ personal experiences: *“Whatever they like, that is what will be expressed. This way, students gain a better understanding of life, as it is connected to their everyday experiences.”* This strategy of linking lessons to lived experiences makes learning meaningful and memorable. Classroom practices also emphasize confidence-building through roleplay, monologues, and repeated use of classroom English expressions. She noted that younger students respond enthusiastically to songs and games, while older students face greater challenges due to self-consciousness, requiring more deliberate encouragement.

Ms. NA’s teaching philosophy aligns with principles of meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning. She begins lessons with icebreakers such as singing to build readiness, integrates contextual experiences to ensure meaning, and consistently incorporates enjoyable activities to sustain motivation. She also uses reflection at the end of lessons, asking students to articulate difficulties and areas for improvement, thereby embedding metacognitive practices into her pedagogy. These strategies demonstrate capability not only in delivering content but also in cultivating a supportive learning environment.

In terms of resources, Ms. NA integrates digital tools gradually, using projectors, audio materials, and platforms such as Quizizz (Wayground) to enhance engagement. She observed that students respond with enthusiasm to digital media, though full integration of digitalization remains in progress. Professional development through webinars also contributes to her pedagogical growth, particularly in understanding the characteristics of primary school learners and adapting strategies accordingly. However, she noted that opportunities for structured English-specific training are limited compared to other subjects, which may constrain broader capability development.

Finally, Ms. NA identified foundational English knowledge, confidence, and the ability to create enjoyable learning experiences as the most crucial capabilities for teaching English at the primary level: *“The essential competence that must be present begins with the basics. Teachers must first understand the fundamentals; once they do, they will certainly feel confident. Equally important is that the learning process remains enjoyable.”* This underscores the interdependence of linguistic and pedagogical skills, where mastery of basic English enables teachers to model language confidently, and pedagogical creativity ensures that students engage positively with learning.

Overall, the analysis of capability reveals a teacher who is committed to continuous self-improvement, skilled in adapting pedagogy to student needs, and supported by both school and parents. Yet, challenges remain in the form of limited instructional time, uneven student confidence, and restricted access to formal training. Addressing these constraints will be essential to strengthening teacher capability as English becomes a mandatory subject in 2027.

Engagement

The theme of engagement in this study captures the motivation, involvement, and collaborative practices that shape teachers' readiness to teach English in primary schools. Ms. NA described her personal motivation as rooted in a desire to contribute to the development of English from the foundational level: *"My motivation is to contribute to the development of English as an important foundation for elementary school students."* Her commitment is sustained by the enthusiasm of students who are able to practice English in daily life, which she identified as her primary source of motivation. Family influence also played a role, as her parents encouraged her to apply her knowledge in the primary school context, reinforcing her sense of purpose.

Ms. NA's engagement is characterized by both challenge and enthusiasm. She explained that teaching is not burdensome but rather stimulating, as each grade level presents distinct classroom dynamics and student characteristics: *"I do not feel burdened, but I am challenged, since each year and each grade level presents a different classroom atmosphere."* This reflects a professional identity shaped by resilience and adaptability, where engagement is sustained through the joy of interacting with children and the challenge of addressing diverse learning needs.

Institutional and collegial support further strengthen engagement. Ms. NA reported that the school grants her autonomy without imposing rigid targets, as long as her practices align with shared goals. Collaboration with colleagues, particularly homeroom teachers, is central to her work. For example, during the *Siaga Garuda* program, she provided English materials and modeling, while homeroom teachers handled intensive drills: *"I deliver the material, provide a model, demonstrate how the practice should be carried out, and then proceed with drills together with the homeroom teacher."* This illustrates how engagement extends beyond individual motivation to include partnerships that ensure collective success.

Engagement also manifests in extracurricular and enrichment activities. Ms. NA actively prepared students for storytelling competitions, dedicating daily practice sessions over a month to train selected participants. Her efforts resulted in multiple awards, demonstrating the impact of sustained teacher engagement on student achievement. She also contributes to the *Kelas Plus* program, which sharpens conversational skills through weekly sessions, and has begun developing social media content to showcase students' English abilities. These initiatives highlight her proactive role in expanding opportunities for student engagement beyond the classroom.

While collaboration with parents is less formalized, Ms. NA noted strong parental support, particularly in competitions and supplementary learning. Parents often encourage their children to participate in external contests or enroll in private English lessons, reinforcing the teacher's efforts. This parental involvement complements school-based engagement and reflects a broader community commitment to English learning.

Finally, Ms. NA expressed optimism about the upcoming policy shift that will make English a mandatory subject in 2027. She welcomed the change as a positive development and affirmed her readiness: *"Ready. In fact, this is what has been eagerly awaited."* At the same time, she emphasized the importance of ensuring that implementation aligns with the realities of classroom practice and recognizes the expertise of English-trained teachers. Her engagement thus extends to policy discourse, reflecting both anticipation and critical awareness of the challenges ahead.

In summary, engagement in this case is driven by intrinsic motivation, sustained through student enthusiasm, and reinforced by institutional, collegial, and parental support. It is expressed through active participation in enrichment programs, competitions, and innovative initiatives such as digital content creation. The findings suggest that engagement is a dynamic interplay of personal commitment, collaborative practices, and external support, all of which will be crucial in navigating the transition to mandatory English instruction.

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of specialist English teachers in primary schools, particularly in the context of the upcoming curriculum transition that will make English a mandatory subject in 2027. While current policy frameworks often position homeroom teachers as the default instructors for English, the evidence from Ms. NA's case demonstrates the unique value that specialist teachers bring to early English education. Their presence ensures that instruction is not only linguistically accurate but also pedagogically intentional, aligning with broader goals of fostering confidence, literacy, and meaningful engagement among young learners.

The existence of specialist teachers at the primary level challenges the assumption that homeroom teachers, regardless of their background, can adequately deliver English instruction. Homeroom teachers often have limited formal training in English education, which constrains their ability to provide accurate language models and effective pedagogical strategies (Widagsa et al., 2025). In contrast, specialist teachers like Ms. NA possess both linguistic competence and pedagogical awareness, enabling them to design lessons that are contextual, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate. This reflects the qualities that English teachers are expected to possess, as highlighted by Murray and Christison (2020). Overall, Ms. NA's competence clearly demonstrates her readiness to teach English, particularly in her ability to align her pedagogical practices with curriculum goals.

Specialist teachers contribute not only through their language proficiency but also through their cognitive understanding of how children learn languages, their knowledge of pedagogical principles, and their professional agency (Richards, 2010). Cognitively, they recognize the importance of reducing anxiety and building confidence (Jin et al., 2021). Their knowledge base allows them to integrate meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning principles, as promoted in the current Indonesian curriculum (Kemendikdasmen, n.d.), ensuring that lessons are both relevant and motivating.

Teacher agency emerges as a cornerstone of readiness in this study. Agency refers to the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and make informed choices in their practice. Ms. NA's agency is evident in her autonomy to design classroom rules in English, her initiative in preparing students for competitions, and her innovation in developing digital content. These actions reflect more than compliance with policy; they illustrate a proactive stance where the teacher shapes learning experiences that allow students to do meaningful practices and enjoy doing English-related activities (Rahimi & Ong, 2023). In addition, Ms. NA's readiness is reflected in her active engagement in supporting programs such as *Kelas Plus*, as well as her collaboration with homeroom teachers in preparing students for events that involve English activities. Her willingness to participate in webinars and professional learning communities further strengthens her readiness and shapes her agency. This finding suggests that teacher agency is fostered through connection among teachers and professional development (Zhang & Peng, 2024).

The findings suggest that relying solely on homeroom teachers to deliver English instruction risks undermining the quality and consistency of learning outcomes. Specialist teachers bring added value through their linguistic expertise, pedagogical knowledge, and agency, which collectively enhance student engagement and achievement. As English becomes mandatory, policy should recognize and institutionalize the role of specialist teachers, ensuring that their expertise is not marginalized but leveraged to support curriculum goals. Furthermore, professional development opportunities should be expanded to strengthen both capability and agency, enabling teachers to adapt to evolving curricular demands while maintaining student-centered practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the readiness of English specialist teachers to teach English at the primary school level amid the curriculum transition from elective to mandatory in 2027. Guided by the themes of alignment, capability, and engagement, the findings reveal that specialist teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that English instruction is consistent with school goals, supported by pedagogical competence, and sustained through motivation and collaboration. Alignment was evident in the shared vision of early English literacy, though weakened by the absence of formal documentation and structural constraints. Capability was demonstrated through continuous self-improvement, adaptive pedagogy, and creative use of

resources, yet limited by restricted instructional time and lack of formal certification opportunities. Engagement was driven by intrinsic motivation, reinforced by institutional and parental support, and expressed through enrichment activities and innovation, highlighting the teacher's agency in shaping meaningful learning experiences.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on a single site and one participant, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. While the case provides rich insights into the lived experiences of one English specialist teacher, future research should expand to multiple sites and participants to capture diverse perspectives and contexts. Comparative studies between specialist and homeroom teachers would also deepen understanding of the distinct contributions each group makes to English instruction at the primary level. For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of formally recognizing and supporting specialist teachers in primary schools. Their cognition, knowledge, and agency enable them to make intentional and informed pedagogical decisions that homeroom teachers with limited English backgrounds may struggle to achieve. Policy frameworks should institutionalize the role of specialist teachers, provide structured professional development opportunities, and allocate sufficient instructional time and resources to sustain quality English education.

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