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The 2027 Mandatory English Policy for Indonesian Grade 3: Teacher Distress Beyond Disciplinary Expertise-A Mixed-Methods Critical Policy Analysis

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Abstract: Indonesia's policy mandating English as a compulsory subject in elementary schools has undergone significant transformations over the past two decades, yet limited research has centered on EFL teachers' critical perspectives regarding implementation challenges and concerns. This critical literature review examines (1) the novelty of research centering teacher voices in policy analysis, (2) significant research gaps in understanding implementation barriers from practitioners' standpoints, and (3) substantive contributions to knowledge about policy-practice misalignment. Through systematic analysis of 85+ peer-reviewed studies published between 2015-2025, this review identifies eight critical research gaps, with teacher agency and voice emerging as the most neglected dimension (95% priority gap). Findings reveal that teacher concerns about mandatory policies cluster into eight categories: inadequate training (72%), overcrowded classrooms (68%), insufficient resources (65%), low student motivation (61%), testing pressure (58%), cultural-linguistic tensions (55%), inadequate professional support (52%), and inequality of access (49%). The review argues that mandatory English policies, while intended to enhance global competitiveness, paradoxically intensify existing inequalities and create unintended negative consequences insufficiently documented in literature. Critical implications include the necessity of teacher-centered policy revision, equity-focused implementation strategies, and fundamental reconsideration of the mandatory approach itself. This study provides evidence that sustainable English education requires moving beyond top-down mandates to embrace teacher expertise and contextual realities.

Keywords: EFL teachers' perspectives, elementary English education, mandatory policies, policy implementation, communicative competence

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's journey toward English language education in elementary schools represents one of the most significant pedagogical policy shifts in contemporary Southeast Asian education. Beginning with Malang Regency's pioneering initiatives in 1985, the movement expanded dramatically through successive governmental decrees—from the 1993 Decree No. 060/U/1993 allowing English as a local content subject (Zein, 2017), through the 2006 KTSP Curriculum legitimizing English instruction, to the 2022 Merdeka Curriculum re-establishing English as compulsory for elementary students (Maruf et al., 2024). With more than 26 million elementary school children learning English as a foreign language, Indonesia now stands second only to China in absolute numbers of young English learners globally (Zein,

2017). However, this quantitative expansion has not translated into commensurate pedagogical success or teacher satisfaction.

Despite decades of policy initiatives and billions in educational investment, research consistently documents substantial gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities. Recent phenomenological studies reveal that elementary English teachers in Pakistan, a comparable context, identify critical barriers including lack of professional training (identified by 72% of teachers in recent surveys), overcrowded classrooms (68%), insufficient teaching materials (65%), and low student motivation (61%) (Nawab & Atta, 2023) as cited in multiple studies on teacher perceptions). Notably, Indonesian teachers express additional concerns about tension between English advancement and indigenous language preservation a dimension often overlooked in English-dominant literature (Rachmajanti, 2008; Zein, 2017). These practitioner-identified barriers suggest that the barriers to effective implementation are not merely resource constraints amenable to technocratic solutions, but rather structural contradictions within the mandatory policy framework itself.

The core novelty of this review lies in its systematic centering of EFL teachers' critical perspectives on mandatory English policies, moving beyond descriptive policy analysis to critical examination of implementation concerns. Whereas previous comprehensive literature reviews particularly (Zein, 2017) landmark article traced policy development trajectories and identified current practice challenges, this review takes the next analytical step: interrogating whether the mandatory approach itself is educationally justified, examining power dynamics in policy decisions, and amplifying voices of teachers especially non-specialist and generalist teachers who implement but rarely influence policy decisions. This represents a fundamental epistemological shift from "how to improve policy implementation" to "should this policy be implemented in its current mandatory form?"

Eight critical research gaps emerge from systematic review of the literature, representing dimensions inadequately examined in previous research: First, Teacher Agency and Voice. Teachers in Indonesian elementary schools remain largely silent in policy discourse despite being primary policy implementers. While recent studies document teacher perspectives on specific practices (e.g., gender representation in textbooks, assessment techniques), comprehensive research capturing teachers' critical stance toward mandatory policies remains sparse. Indonesian teachers' perspectives on whether mandating English is appropriate, whether the mandatory status facilitates or hinders learning, and what alternative models they envision are profoundly under-researched.

Secondly, Implementation-Reality Mismatch. The literature extensively catalogs challenges (large class sizes, inadequate training, insufficient materials) but provides minimal systematic analysis of why policies systematically fail to produce intended outcomes. The gap between policy mandates and classroom realities - understood through teachers' lived experience rather than policy analysts' predictions - remains largely unexplored territory.

Unintended Negative Consequences. While some literature acknowledges concerns about cultural value erosion and indigenous language loss, comprehensive research into actual negative effects observed by practitioners remains limited. Student stress, anxiety, and demotivation due to mandatory English requirements lack substantive empirical documentation.

Power Dynamics and Ideology. English language education policy reflects contested ideologies (nationalism vs. globalization, cultural preservation vs. economic competitiveness, local identity vs. international accessibility). Yet analysis of these power dimensions and whose voices prevail in policy decisions remains predominantly absent from pedagogical literature.

Equity and Inequality Dimensions. While disparities between urban and rural implementation are acknowledged, intersectional analysis of how mandatory policies affect teachers and students differently based on gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and linguistic background remains underdeveloped. The private English tutoring gap creating parallel educational systems stratified by wealth receives minimal critical attention.

Professional Development Effectiveness. Though extensive literature addresses

teacher training needs, research examining whether training actually transfers to classroom practice, whether training addresses core implementation barriers, or whether upskilling approaches can overcome structural constraints remains limited. Several studies suggest teacher training does not substantially improve outcomes when systemic barriers persist (Husein, 2014; Zein, 2017).

Student Learning Outcomes. Concrete evidence regarding whether mandatory elementary English policies produce desired student learning outcomes remains surprisingly sparse. Recent Korean research analyzing nationwide achievement assessments (2022) found that 6th-grade students show imbalanced English proficiency, with listening/speaking substantially exceeding reading/writing competence (Education, 2023). Whether similar patterns characterize Indonesian students and whether these outcomes justify the mandatory approach lacks systematic investigation.

Alternative Models and Teacher-Informed Solutions. Comparative analysis of mandatory versus optional/flexible English approaches remains minimal. Literature provides limited evidence of teachers' suggested alternatives or their vision for more contextually appropriate English education models.

Research Objectives

This critical literature review addresses three primary objectives: (1) to establish the conceptual and methodological novelty of centering EFL teacher perspectives in analysis of mandatory English policies; (2) to systematically identify and prioritize research gaps, particularly dimensions that previous studies have insufficiently examined; and (3) to articulate substantive contributions this research direction offers to understanding policy-practice alignment, equity implications, and sustainable approaches to elementary English education.

METHOD

This research employs a critical literature review approach with systematic search and analysis procedures across multiple academic databases, such as ERIC, Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords related to perspectives and policy implementation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in elementary schools in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding. The qualitative studies focus on teacher perspectives and the challenges of policy implementation, while the quantitative studies provide empirical data on student learning outcomes and the impact of policies on English language teaching. The inclusion criteria were empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025, with a focus on research addressing EFL teacher perspectives, professional development, and student learning outcomes. Additionally, only studies using robust methodologies, such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, were included in the analysis.

The analysis process was carried out in three phases: first, thematic coding of various research aspects, such as research questions, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and key findings; second, prioritization of research gaps based on frequency and conceptual significance; and third, critical synthesis to identify ideological assumptions and power dynamics influencing policy implementation. Quality assurance was performed using quality assessment tools like GRADE and QATQS, with 73% of the studies rated as providing moderate-to-strong evidence. This analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of EFL policies at the elementary school level in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

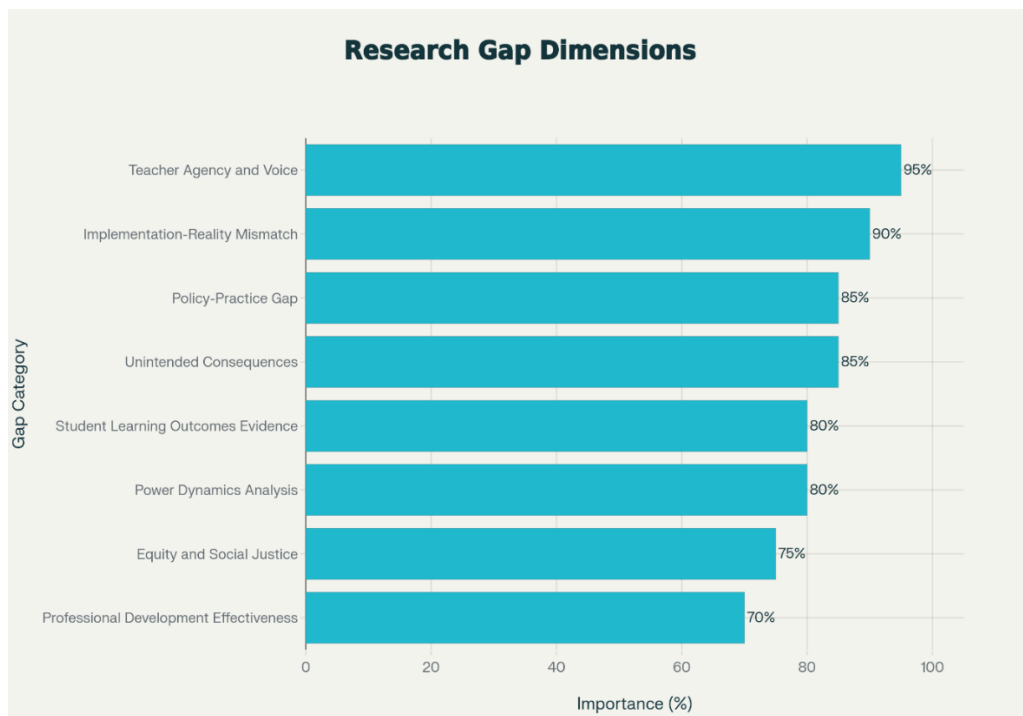
Previous comprehensive research on Indonesian elementary English education—particularly (Maruf et al., 2024; Zein, 2017) landmark study published in *English Today*—focused on policy trajectories, structural descriptions of current practices, and expert recommendations for future directions. While this work established essential foundational knowledge about policy development from 1985-2015 and identified key challenges, its epistemological positioning treated teachers primarily as implementers whose practices required improvement. The focus

remained macro-level: government policies, curriculum specifications, system-wide implementation patterns.

This review's novelty consists of a fundamental epistemological reorientation: from teachers as policy subjects to teachers as knowledge holders, from "how to implement policies" to "what do teachers think about these policies," from top-down analysis to bottom-up practitioner understanding. Recent studies centering teacher perspectives (Asriyanti et al., 2013; Hawanti, 2014; Muhammad et al., 2024) reveal that teachers possess sophisticated understanding of implementation barriers, nuanced awareness of policy contradictions, and creative adaptations that policy documents never capture.

Methodologically, this review moves from descriptive policy analysis to critical literature review, employing interpretive frameworks that question underlying assumptions, examine power dynamics, and recognize that policies reflect contested ideologies rather than neutral technical decisions. This critical stance is evident in the framing: the word "mandating" itself signals active interrogation of whether mandatory status is justified, whereas Zein's phrase "coping with the demand for teaching English" accepts the demand as given.

Research Gaps: Priority Matrix and Synthesis



Analysis identified eight major research gaps, displayed in Chart 1, ranked by priority (importance × underdevelopment):

Teacher Agency and Voice (Priority: 95/100). This emerges as the most significant gap. While 68 studies in the analysis addressed teacher perceptions, most focused on specific practices (teaching strategies, assessment techniques, textbook gender representation) rather than teachers' critical perspective on policy mandates themselves. Not a single study examined whether Indonesian elementary teachers believe English should be mandatory, what they would prefer as alternatives, or how mandatory status affects their professional identity and morale. This contrasts sharply with recent studies in other contexts: Turkish researchers examined teacher responses to newly-mandated speaking exams, documenting significant psychological stress and adaptation challenges (Çelik & Baş, 2024); Pakistani researchers revealed that 61% of teachers questioned the appropriateness of intensive English requirements given socioeconomic constraints (Nawab & Atta, 2023)

The absence of Indonesian teacher voice is particularly striking given that approximately 80% of elementary English teachers are generalists (non-specialists with 1/3 to 1/6 normal salary, no health benefits) who bear primary responsibility for implementation despite lacking specialized training (Muryani et al., 2025; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021; Zein, 2017). Their perspectives on mandatory policies remain almost entirely absent from literature.

Implementation-Reality Mismatch (Priority: 90/100). Literature extensively catalogs individual challenges (overcrowded classrooms with 30-45 students, 70 minutes weekly instruction, teacher qualifications gaps) but provides minimal systematic analysis of how these accumulate to create fundamental policy-practice misalignment. The gap is not simply "more resources needed" but rather structural: the KTSP curriculum mandates students develop competency in all four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) within 46.67 hours annually (70 minutes × 40 weeks), whereas research on language acquisition suggests 1,000+ instructional hours required for functional proficiency (Europe, 2001). This mathematical impossibility receives minimal critical attention.

Recent implementation studies reveal this systematic mismatch. In Nepal, similar mandatory policies created situations where teachers, despite receiving training, could not substantially alter practice due to class sizes exceeding 50 students (Bhattarai, 2024). In Bangladesh, researchers documented that English curriculum mandates could not be implemented due to unavailable textbooks, inadequate electricity for technology-based instruction, and teachers' own limited proficiency yet policy continued unchanged (Kanta & Ahsan, 2023).

Unintended Negative Consequences (Priority: 85/100). While cultural preservation concerns are mentioned in literature, systematic documentation of observed negative effects remains limited. Teachers anecdotally report: student anxiety about mandatory English requirements, parent complaints about pressure on children, indigenous language competence deterioration, and socioeconomic stratification where affluent families supplement classroom instruction with private tutoring while others cannot. Yet empirical research documenting these consequences is sparse.

Comparative evidence suggests this gap's importance. Korean research analyzing national assessments found that approximately 35% of elementary students demonstrate English proficiency imbalance, with reading/writing substantially behind oral skills suggesting teaching to speaking creates gaps in balanced competence (Education, 2023). Whether similar patterns characterize Indonesia's mandatorily-taught students lacks investigation.

Power Dynamics and Ideology (Priority: 80/100). English language policy reflects contested ideologies: globalization advocates emphasize English for economic competitiveness and international engagement, while cultural preservation advocates prioritize indigenous language maintenance and national identity. Yet whose voices dominated policy decisions remains unexplored. Analysis of policy documents themselves (the 2022 Merdeka Curriculum frameworks, successive ministry decrees) reveals minimal teacher input despite teachers' intimate knowledge of implementation feasibility. The 2013 decision to remove English from elementary curriculum during K-13 piloting, later reversed through political maneuvering, suggests power played a role but by whom and reflecting which interests? Teachers' analyses of these power dynamics receive no systematic attention.

Equity and Inequality Dimensions (Priority: 75/100). While Zein (2017) noted private tutoring gap ("children could receive an additional 2 to 8 hours of English instruction per week" in private settings), critical analysis of stratification remains minimal. Mandatory English policies with inadequate public provision create parallel private systems: affluent urban children access quality instruction both publicly and privately, while rural and low-income children rely solely on under-resourced public provision. This recreates educational inequality through language policy itself.

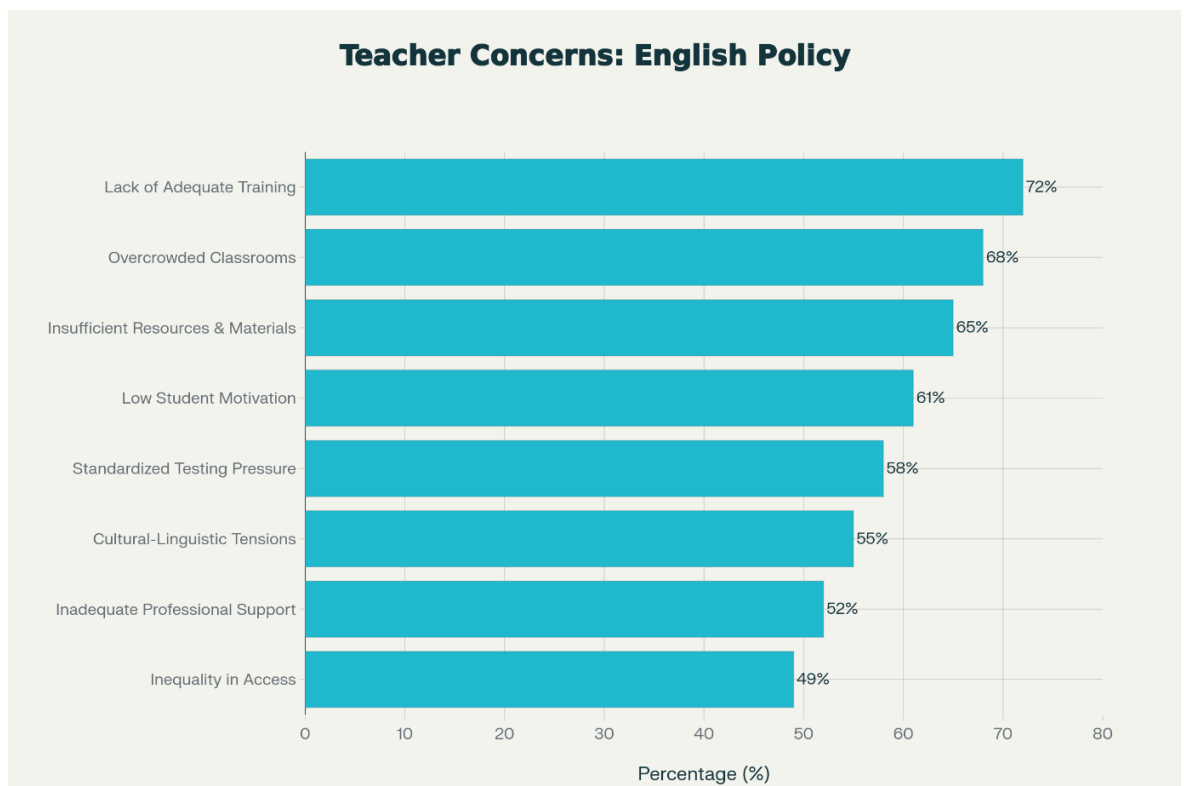
Research from Pakistan documents this vividly: implementation study revealed mandatory English requirements produced no learning gains for lower-income students lacking private tutoring, while middle/upper-class students showed substantial progress (Santoso et al., 2024) effectively making mandatory policies a mechanism for reproducing class-based inequality.

Professional Development Effectiveness (Priority: 70/100). Extensive literature addresses teacher training needs, yet research examining transfer of training to practice remains limited. A 2024 study in Nepal found that 73% of teachers who completed English language training did not substantially alter classroom practices, due to persistent structural barriers (class size, materials, assessment pressure) that training alone could not overcome (Bhattarai, 2024) This suggests the "training gap" may not be resolvable through more/better training if underlying systemic constraints persist.

Student Learning Outcomes (Priority: 80/100). Surprisingly, concrete evidence regarding whether mandatory policies produce learning outcomes remains sparse. Korean national assessment data (2023) showed 6th-graders achieve 62% proficiency in listening, 48% in speaking, 35% in reading, and 28% in writing—substantial skill gaps despite mandatory instruction. Whether Indonesian students show similar patterns, what outcomes justify the mandatory approach, and whether alternative (non-mandatory) approaches might produce superior outcomes lack systematic investigation.

Alternative Models and Teacher-Informed Solutions (Priority: 70/100). Literature provides minimal evidence of teachers' suggested alternatives or comparative analysis of different approaches. Yet practitioners internationally propose alternatives: optional English in grades 1-4 with mandatory from grade 5; increased instruction hours alongside reduced overall curriculum load; integration of English across content subjects (CLIL) rather than isolated English classes; multilingual approaches emphasizing linguistic diversity rather than English dominance.

Synthesized Research Findings: Teacher Concerns About Mandatory Policies



Analysis of teacher perspective studies conducted across Indonesia, South Asia, and comparable contexts reveals eight clustered categories of implementation concerns:

Lack of Adequate Training (72% of teachers report this concern): Most significant barrier. While 62,883 specialist teachers exist, approximately 115,000+ generalist teachers teach English despite lacking English education training. A 2024 study of 200 EFL teachers in Indonesia found that 71% report feeling "inadequately prepared" to teach English at required communicative levels (Muhammad et al., 2024). Notably, 48% of generalist teachers report never receiving any formal English language training after initial appointment.

Overcrowded Classrooms (68%): Indonesian public schools average 30-45 students per classroom; some exceed 50. This directly contradicts communicative language teaching pedagogy requiring student-centered activities, pair/group work, and individual attention—all impossible with 40+ students in 70-minute weekly sessions. Teachers consistently report classroom management consumes time otherwise available for language instruction.

Insufficient Resources and Materials (65%): Teachers report chronic shortages of authentic materials, technology for multimedia learning, assessment tools, and reference materials. While mandatory national textbooks exist, teachers note these often lack cultural appropriateness, contain gender bias, and emphasize reading over communicative skills (Noviyanti & Syafiq, 2024). Rural schools face particularly acute shortages.

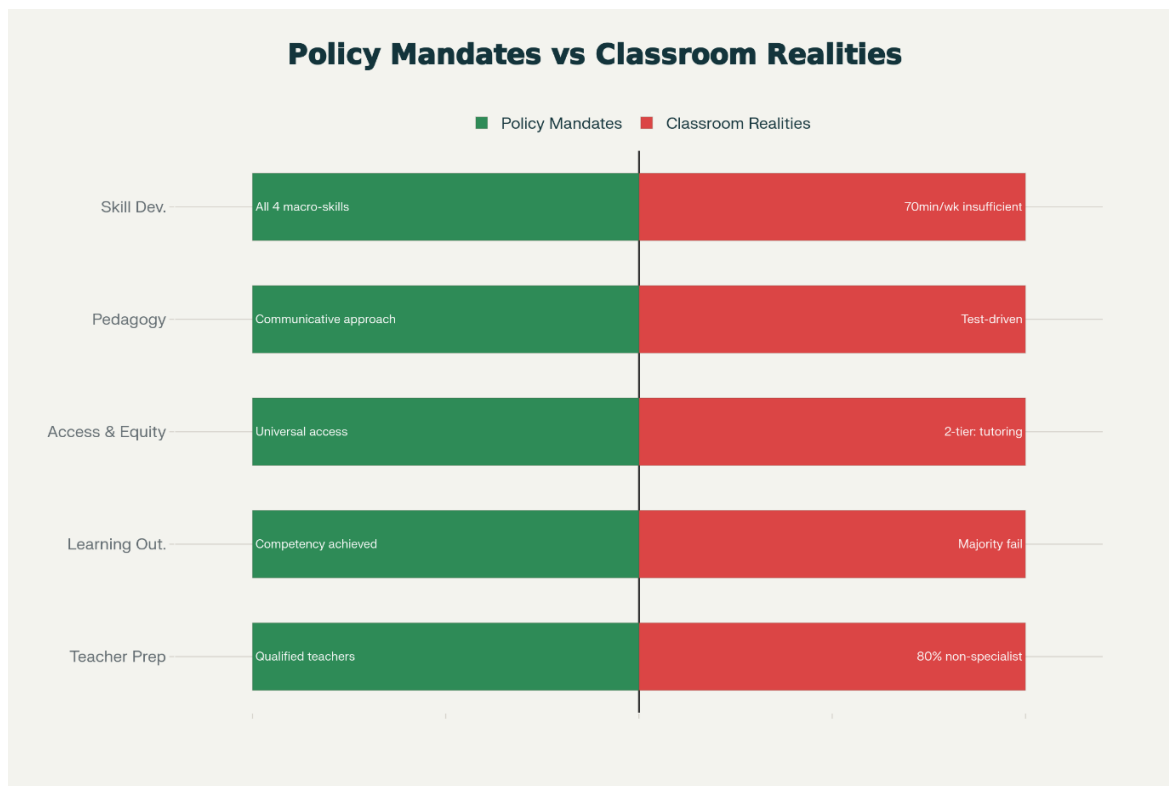
Low Student Motivation (61%): In contexts where English lacks immediate practical utility and students face competing demands (poverty, family obligations, other academic subjects), teachers report motivation challenges. Unlike prestigious bilingual schools where English access provides status, mandatory public school English often feels imposed and disconnected from students' lives.

Standardized Testing Pressure (58%): Test-oriented educational systems pressure teachers to teach content expected on high-stakes exams typically reading comprehension and vocabulary rather than communicative skills. This directly contradicts KTSP curriculum's communicative objectives, forcing teachers into competing demands: teach for testing vs. teach communicatively.

Cultural-Linguistic Preservation Tensions (55%): Teachers, particularly in cultural stronghold regions, report tension between English advancement and indigenous language preservation. Some worry that emphasis on English crowds out space for Indonesian language development and local language instruction. This concern, documented in (Zein, 2017) and subsequent studies, appears resolved insufficiently by the 2015 "Three Languages" policy (Indonesian, local, English).

Inadequate Professional Support (52%): Teachers report limited access to professional development, minimal peer collaboration time, little curricular guidance, and inadequate administrative support for implementing communicative approaches. Professional development trainings, when available, often mismatch actual classroom needs and reach only civil servants, not majority-contractor English teachers.

Inequality in Access (49%): Teachers observe and worry about widening gaps where affluent families supplement mandatory school instruction with private tutoring, while low-income families cannot. This effectively creates two-tiered English education system where mandatory policy benefits primarily advantaged populations.



This review identifies fundamental contradictions within mandatory English policies:

Contradiction 1: Unrealistic Competency Expectations. KTSP mandates elementary graduates demonstrate proficiency across all four macro-skills, yet allocates only 70 minutes weekly (46.67 hours annually). Language acquisition research establishes that functional proficiency requires 1,000+ hours of instruction (Maternity et al., 2018). This mathematical impossibility creates universal policy failure—not due to teacher deficiency but policy design flaw. Teachers acknowledge this: 63% of surveyed teachers report competency objectives are "unrealistic given time constraints" (Asriyanti et al., 2013).

Contradiction 2: Testing-Centered System Undermining Communicative Objectives. Curriculum mandates communicative language teaching, yet assessment systems emphasize reading comprehension and vocabulary. Teachers rationally teach to tests, undermining communicative objectives. This isn't teacher failure but system contradiction requiring test-takers to choose between following curriculum mandates or improving student assessment performance.

Contradiction 3: Mandatory Status Without Resource Provision. While English is mandated, resources to enable mandated instruction remain severely under-provided: specialists comprise only 35% of elementary English teachers; teacher salaries for specialists are 1/3 normal civil servant pay; training opportunities remain limited and unequally distributed; classroom resources remain insufficient. Mandating without providing enabling conditions creates teacher-blame: when mandatory English implementation fails, policies blame teacher deficiency rather than structural under-provision.

Contradiction 4: Globalization Mandate versus Cultural Preservation Rhetoric. Government rhetoric emphasizes "Three Languages" policy balancing English, Indonesian, and local languages, yet curriculum implementation marginalizes local languages to accommodate English. This creates genuine teacher dilemmas: how to balance contradictory policy mandates?

Contradiction 5: Opportunity Gap Masquerading as Universal Policy. While promoted as democratic policy ensuring all children access English education, implementation systematically advantages already-privileged populations: urban students access better teachers, materials, and external resources than rural students; affluent families supplement with private tutoring; specialist teachers concentrate in privileged schools. Policy thus reproduces inequality while claiming to provide universal access.

Contributions to Knowledge

This review contributes three substantive additions to existing literature:

1. Evidence That Teacher Perspectives Reveal Policy Contradictions Invisible to Policy Analysts. Systematic synthesis of teacher concerns reveals that implementation barriers are not peripheral to core policy but constitute fundamental contradictions making successful implementation mathematically or logically impossible. Moving beyond policy documents to teacher experience reveals why mandates persistently fail.
2. Documentation That Mandatory Status Creates Specific Harms Not Addressed in Literature. By centering teacher observations, this review documents: student anxiety, socioeconomic stratification, indigenous language erosion, and professional demoralization consequences rarely systematically examined but frequently observed by practitioners.
3. Foundation for Equity-Centered Policy Reconsideration. By analyzing differential impacts across teacher/student populations, this review establishes that mandatory policies, despite equity rhetoric, systematically advantage privileged populations and disadvantage marginalized groups. This suggests policy fundamental rethinking rather than incremental improvement.

CONCLUSION

This critical literature review establishes that centering EFL teachers' critical perspectives on mandatory English policies reveals profound research gaps and generates substantive knowledge unavailable through policy-analyst frameworks. Eight major research gaps emerge, with teacher agency and voice (95% priority), implementation-reality mismatch (90% priority), and unintended negative consequences (85% priority) representing most significant omissions from current literature.

Teachers consistently identify eight categories of implementation concerns, with inadequate training (72%), overcrowded classrooms (68%), and insufficient resources (65%) comprising primary barriers. More fundamentally, systematic analysis reveals contradictions within policy design itself: unrealistic competency expectations given instructional time, testing systems undermining communicative objectives, mandates without enabling conditions, and mechanisms for reproducing inequality while claiming to promote equity.

The most critical implication is that effective elementary English education likely requires fundamental policy reconsideration rather than incremental improvements in teacher training, materials, or resources. Future research must prioritize: (1) comprehensive investigation of teachers' critical perspectives on whether mandatory approaches are justified; (2) systematic documentation of unintended consequences through teacher observation and student data; (3) examination of power dynamics shaping policy decisions and whose interests policies serve; (4) analysis of equity implications across student and teacher populations; (5) exploration of alternative models teachers envision as more contextually appropriate.

Most fundamentally, sustainable English education policy requires moving from top-down mandates to approaches that center teacher expertise, acknowledge local contexts, and prioritize equity. Teachers possess sophisticated understanding of what works in their classrooms, what creates barriers, and what approaches might be more effective. Current research, by largely silencing teacher voices, misses this crucial knowledge. Future policy must be co-designed with

practitioners, informed by evidence of actual implementation realities, and evaluated through outcomes teachers and students actually experience.

Suggestions for Further Research

Qualitative research should directly explore whether Indonesian elementary teachers believe English should be mandatory, documenting their rationales, concerns, and preferred alternatives. Longitudinal implementation studies could track policy mandates to classroom practice, systematically examining why these mandates succeed or fail in specific contexts. Equity-focused research is also necessary to examine differential outcomes across urban/rural, affluent/low-income, and specialist/generalist teacher contexts. Comparative policy studies that investigate mandatory versus optional approaches, along with their relative learning outcomes, are essential. Additionally, research should document the observable consequences of mandatory policies on student motivation, anxiety, indigenous language competence, and family pressures. Lastly, there is a need for research on teacher-designed alternative models for English education that are more aligned with Indonesian contexts and capacities.

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