Understanding Primary School English Teachers' Perspectives on Multicultural Education in Eastern Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of primary school English teachers on multicultural education within the context of Eastern Indonesia, particularly in Ambon City. The research aims to understand how teachers perceive the importance, relevance, and challenges of multicultural education in shaping students' social awareness and intercultural competence. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected from six primary school English teachers through a ten-item questionnaire consisting of two categories: conceptual understanding and perceived importance of multicultural education. The results reveal that all participants demonstrated a high level of conceptual awareness regarding the value of multicultural education in fostering tolerance, respect, and social harmony among students. However, variations emerged in teachers' readiness to implement multicultural-based approaches in classroom instruction. While most teachers agreed that integrating local cultural content is essential, a few expressed uncertainty due to limited pedagogical resources and institutional support. Overall, the findings highlight that teachers' perspectives are shaped not only by theoretical understanding but also by contextual realities of teaching in a culturally diverse environment. The study concludes that strengthening teachers' professional capacity and institutional support is crucial to bridge the gap between understanding and practice. These findings offer valuable insights for future research and policy development in multicultural and English language education across Indonesia's diverse regions.

Keywords: *Eastern Indonesia, English Language Teaching, Multicultural Education, Primary School Teachers, Teachers' Perspectives*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity forms a defining element of its national identity. As a vast archipelago with more than 1,300 ethnic groups and over 700 regional languages (Antini & Artini, 2025), Indonesia represents one of the most complex multicultural societies in the world. Within this setting, education plays a pivotal role in shaping

citizens who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of coexisting harmoniously amid diversity. It serves as a platform for nurturing tolerance, promoting social cohesion, and fostering awareness of cultural plurality (Mariyono, 2024).

In such a diverse context, the teaching of English as a foreign language carries both linguistic and cultural responsibilities. Teachers are not only transmitters of language skills but also mediators of values, identity, and intercultural understanding. Their perspectives on multiculturalism, therefore, shape the extent to which language classrooms become inclusive spaces that reflect and respect diversity. This study emerges from that concern—how teachers perceive multicultural education and how their understanding influences classroom practices, particularly in culturally rich regions such as Maluku.

BACKGROUND

In Eastern Indonesia—especially in the province of Maluku—the dynamics of multiculturalism are particularly pronounced. The region's diverse ethnic and religious composition has historically shaped social interactions that are both vibrant and sensitive. Consequently, multicultural education is not a peripheral initiative but a strategic necessity for sustaining harmony and preventing cultural fragmentation. It aims to prepare young learners to appreciate differences and engage constructively in plural societies.

However, the successful implementation of multicultural education in schools, particularly within English language teaching, depends largely on teachers' perspectives. As educational agents, teachers do more than deliver content; they interpret curriculum goals, select culturally relevant materials, and embody the values they seek to impart. A teacher with limited or skeptical views of multicultural principles may unintentionally reproduce cultural hierarchies or overlook diversity in the classroom. Conversely, a teacher with a strong and positive multicultural orientation can actively promote intercultural dialogue, integrate local content, and encourage respect for cultural differences.

Despite its importance, empirical research examining how primary school English teachers in Maluku perceive multicultural education remains limited. Previous studies have generally focused on broader educational contexts or on secondary education (Anggriawan, 2020; Wong, 2025). Wong (2025) noted that teachers often feel unprepared to manage classroom diversity and that their understanding of multiculturalism remains surface-level. Similarly, studies linking multicultural education to the Sustainable Development Goals have seldom addressed the specific challenges faced by English teachers in primary schools. Research by Antini and Artini (2025) in Bali provides an exception, demonstrating that English teachers have used local wisdom—such as *Tri Hita Karana*—as an entry point for integrating multicultural perspectives into their lessons. These studies collectively suggest that while academic interest in teachers' perspectives on multicultural education is growing, it remains uneven and geographically concentrated. The Maluku context, characterized by deep cultural plurality and a complex social history, has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on how primary school English teachers in Maluku conceptualize multiculturalism, identify related challenges, and evaluate its relevance to English teaching. The study ultimately seeks to contribute to both theoretical and practical developments—strengthening multicultural education frameworks and informing policy recommendations that are culturally and contextually grounded.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The Concept of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education represents an approach that recognizes, respects, and integrates the diversity of culture, ethnicity, religion, language, and gender within educational systems. According to Banks (2009), the primary goal of multicultural education is to provide equal opportunities for all learners by embedding the values of justice, equality, and respect for differences. Nieto (2010) further argues that multicultural education should not be viewed merely as the inclusion of cultural elements in the curriculum but rather as a comprehensive framework that transforms the learning paradigm into one that is inclusive, democratic, and humanistic.

In the Indonesian context, cultural and social diversity forms the fundamental rationale for the urgency of multicultural education (Nst, 2024). This approach is not only essential for maintaining social harmony but also for enhancing classroom learning by connecting it with students' real-life experiences (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

Dimensions of Multicultural Education

Banks (2009) identifies five key dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure. These dimensions serve as a critical framework for understanding how teachers interpret and internalize multicultural principles. Teachers' perceptions of these dimensions directly influence how effectively multicultural values can be translated into curriculum design and classroom instruction.

Recent studies reveal that teachers' understanding of multicultural education varies considerably. Some educators equate it primarily with tolerance and interfaith respect, while other crucial aspects—such as knowledge construction and pedagogical transformation—are often overlooked (Wong, 2025). This variation highlights the need to further map teachers' perspectives to gain a more comprehensive picture of their readiness to implement multicultural education.

Teachers' Perspectives in Multicultural Education

Teachers play a pivotal role in interpreting and enacting multicultural education. Yildirim and Tezci (2020) emphasizes that teachers' perspectives encompass beliefs, values, and experiences that shape how they view diversity in the classroom. International research similarly underscores the importance of understanding teachers' viewpoints before implementation takes place. For instance, Kim (2020) in a study found that teachers with positive attitudes toward multiculturalism tend to adopt inclusive and culturally responsive teaching strategies.

In Indonesia, Anggriawan (2020) found that elementary school teachers are aware of the importance of multiculturalism, yet their understanding often remains limited to normative aspects. Antini and Artini (2025) also noted that English teachers in Bali perceive local values such as *Tri Hita Karana* as a meaningful bridge for intercultural learning, though many still require professional development to integrate these values effectively into classroom practices.

Multicultural Education in English Language Teaching

English, as a global lingua franca, occupies a dual role in multicultural education. On one hand, it enables students to access and engage with global cultures; on the other, when taught without multicultural sensitivity, it risks creating a "cultural distance" between learners and their local realities (Busse, 2022). Therefore, English teachers' perspectives become crucial—determining whether local diversity is viewed as a resource for language learning or as a barrier that must be standardized.

Prior studies emphasize the importance of teachers developing intercultural competence in English language teaching (Byram, 2021). Teachers with positive multicultural orientations are more likely to adapt culturally grounded materials, such as local folktales or regional historical figures, thereby fostering not only language proficiency but also students' multicultural awareness (Gay, 2000; Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

Research Gap

Although both international and national literature acknowledge the central role of teachers in multicultural education, few studies specifically explore the perspectives of primary school English teachers in Maluku. Understanding teachers' conceptualization of multicultural dimensions serves as a necessary foundation before investigating classroom practices. Without such understanding, educational interventions, teacher training, and curriculum design risk being misaligned with contextual realities. Consequently, research that focuses on teachers' perspectives is both relevant and strategic as a basis for further inquiry.

METHODOLOGY
Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design aimed at exploring the perspectives of primary school English teachers on multicultural education in Ambon, Maluku. This approach is considered appropriate for capturing teachers' understandings, attitudes, and interpretations of complex sociocultural phenomena without pursuing statistical generalization (Creswell, 2018). Accordingly, the study prioritizes the interpretation of participants' experiences over numerical representation.

Participants

The participants consisted of six English teachers currently teaching in primary schools across Ambon City. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct teaching experience in multicultural classroom environments. The teachers represented diverse backgrounds in terms of religion, ethnicity, and teaching experience, providing a broad range of insights that enriched the study's findings.

Instrument

The primary research instrument was a written questionnaire comprising ten items organized into two main categories:
1. Conceptual Understanding of Multicultural Education (five items), which covered definitions, values, and the perceived urgency of multiculturalism in education.
2. Attitudes and Perceptions Toward the Relevance of Multicultural Education in English Teaching (five items), focusing on perceived challenges, opportunities, and personal reflections on integrating multicultural values.

The questionnaire was designed with open-ended and semi-structured questions to encourage reflective responses. All items were developed based on Banks' (2009) theoretical framework of multicultural education, adjusted to the socio-cultural context of Maluku.

Data Collection

Data were collected through the direct completion of the questionnaire by participating teachers. Clear instructions were provided, and participant anonymity was assured to encourage

honesty and comfort in expressing their views. This method allowed teachers to articulate their perspectives freely without external pressure or institutional influence.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics to illustrate the overall tendencies in teachers' perspectives. As the questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), frequencies and percentages were calculated for each item.

In addition, mean scores were computed to indicate general trends, which were then summarized in tabular form for clarity. These quantitative results were complemented by narrative interpretation to provide deeper insights into how primary school English teachers in Ambon perceive various dimensions of multicultural education.

This analytical approach aligns with the study's objective—to explore teachers' perspectives—by not only presenting numerical data but also emphasizing their interpretive meaning within the context of English language teaching in multicultural settings.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore the perspectives of six primary school English teachers in Ambon regarding various dimensions of multicultural education. The data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of ten statements divided into two main categories:

1. Teachers' Knowledge of Multicultural Education – five items assessing teachers' conceptual understanding, and
2. Teachers' Perspectives on the Importance of Multicultural Education in English Teaching – five items examining their attitudes and perceptions of its relevance in classroom practice.

A descriptive analysis was conducted by calculating the frequency and percentage of responses on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD)

No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Multicultural education helps students appreciate cultural diversity.	4	2	0	0	0
2	Multicultural education is essential for promoting social harmony in schools.	3	3	0	0	0
3	Teachers are responsible for instilling multicultural values in students.	4	2	0	0	0
4	Multicultural education is relevant to the social context of Maluku.	3	3	0	0	0
5	Multicultural education helps students understand themselves within a broader social context.	2	3	1	0	0

Table 1. Teachers' Knowledge of Multicultural Education

Description of Findings

Overall, the data indicate that all participants demonstrated a strong conceptual grasp of multicultural education. In four of the five statements, all teachers selected *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*, with none indicating disagreement. This pattern suggests that the teachers clearly understood the strategic role of multicultural education in fostering social harmony, nurturing tolerance, and developing open-minded learners. Interestingly, one teacher chose *Neutral* for the fifth statement. This may imply that a small number of teachers have yet to fully internalize the connection between multicultural education and students' sense of identity within the broader social framework. Nevertheless, the overall pattern reflects a consistently strong level of conceptual awareness among the participants.

No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Integrating local culture into English language teaching is important.	3	2	1	0	0
2	I feel ready to apply a multicultural approach in my English teaching.	1	2	2	1	0
3	There are still significant challenges in implementing multicultural education.	2	3	1	0	0
4	Multicultural education can increase students' learning motivation.	2	3	1	0	0
5	Multicultural education helps students balance global and local cultural perspectives.	3	2	1	0	0

Table 2. Teachers' Perspectives on the Importance of Multicultural Education in English Teaching

Description of Findings

The results in the second category reveal a slightly more diverse response pattern. Five out of six teachers *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that incorporating local culture into English instruction is essential (Item 6), emphasizing their awareness of the inherent connection between language and culture. However, responses to Item 7—regarding readiness to implement such an approach—were more varied: only half of the teachers expressed confidence, two remained neutral, and one disagreed.

This discrepancy highlights a gap between conceptual understanding and practical readiness. While teachers generally acknowledge the importance of multicultural education, not all of them feel confident in consistently applying it in their classrooms. Moreover, all participants agreed that significant challenges remain in implementation (Item 8), citing constraints related to time, instructional materials, and curriculum support.

Most teachers also concurred that multicultural education can enhance student motivation (Item 9) and foster a balanced understanding of both global and local cultures (Item 10). These responses indicate that teachers view multicultural education not merely as a social value but as a pedagogical strategy that enriches the relevance and engagement of English language learning.

On average, 83% of all responses reflected positive attitudes (*Strongly Agree* or *Agree*), 13% were neutral, and only 4% disagreed, with no respondents selecting *Strongly Disagree*. These results suggest that teachers generally hold favorable perspectives toward multicultural education, although their levels of practical readiness remain uneven.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that primary school English teachers in Ambon possess a solid conceptual understanding of the principles and objectives of multicultural education. They collectively acknowledge its role in promoting tolerance, strengthening social cohesion, and preparing students to live harmoniously in a diverse society. This aligns with Banks and Banks (2016), who assert that multicultural education seeks to achieve educational equity by recognizing and valuing cultural diversity within learning environments.

The socio-historical context of Maluku adds further weight to these findings. As a region that has experienced intergroup conflict rooted in ethnic and religious divisions, multicultural education is perceived by teachers as a critical mechanism for preventing future social fragmentation (Hikam, 2018). The participants' recognition of this relevance demonstrates not only theoretical understanding but also contextual awareness grounded in lived social realities.

However, the responses related to implementation readiness (Item 7) reveal a noticeable disparity between understanding and practice. Some teachers admitted that they were not yet fully prepared to adopt multicultural approaches in their English teaching. This echoes Wong's (2025) findings that, while teachers often express positive attitudes toward multicultural education, they continue to face barriers such as limited training and insufficient pedagogical resources.

Antini and Artini (2025) reached similar conclusions in their study of teachers in Bali, noting that despite their recognition of the importance of integrating local cultural values into English lessons, many still require methodological guidance to do so effectively. Hence, the main challenge lies not in attitude or intention, but in pedagogical competence and institutional support.

Furthermore, these results reinforce Nieto's (2010) argument that multicultural education is not merely about inserting cultural content into the curriculum but about transforming the entire learning paradigm. Teachers must develop a sensitivity to student diversity and view cultural differences as valuable learning resources rather than obstacles. Within English language teaching, this means that teachers can incorporate local folktales, traditional values, and students' cultural experiences as meaningful materials that expand intercultural awareness (Byram, 2021; Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

Overall, three major insights emerge from this study:

1. Teachers' conceptual awareness is well-established. They clearly understand the essence of multicultural education and its relevance to Maluku's social context.
2. Practical readiness needs strengthening. Some teachers remain uncertain about applying multicultural principles due to limited professional training and institutional backing.
3. Future research should focus on classroom-level practices. Further investigation into how teachers enact multicultural education in real teaching contexts will help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

In sum, this study not only reaffirms the importance of multicultural education in English language teaching but also underscores the necessity of systematic efforts to enhance teachers' capacity through context-sensitive training and educational policy support. Such initiatives are vital for ensuring that multicultural education moves beyond conceptual understanding toward transformative pedagogical practice in Maluku's diverse educational landscape.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The findings of this study reveal that primary school English teachers in Ambon possess a strong conceptual understanding and a positive attitude toward multicultural education. They consistently view multicultural education as an essential component for nurturing tolerance, social harmony, and awareness of diversity among students. This perspective is reflected in the questionnaire results, where all participants expressed a high level of agreement with statements emphasizing togetherness, respect for differences, and the relevance of multicultural education to the sociocultural context of Maluku.

However, the study also uncovers variations in teachers' practical readiness to implement multicultural principles in English language teaching. Several teachers reported facing challenges, including limited access to contextually relevant teaching materials, insufficient pedagogical training, and difficulties in adapting instructional strategies to suit the multicultural characteristics of their students. In other words, while teachers' conceptual awareness has been well established, professional and institutional support remain necessary to bridge the gap between understanding and practice.

Overall, this study underscores that multicultural education is not a supplementary agenda but a strategic necessity within the teaching of English in culturally diverse regions such as Maluku. Teachers play a pivotal role as agents of change who cultivate values of diversity and tolerance through reflective and inclusive classroom practices. Mapping teachers' perspectives, therefore, provides an essential foundation for strengthening teacher capacity and informing education policies that are responsive to cultural diversity.

Building upon these insights, several recommendations can be drawn for further development in research and educational practice. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct more in-depth investigations focusing on the practical implementation of multicultural education in English classrooms. Studies employing classroom observations and interviews could illuminate how teachers' beliefs and perceptions translate into concrete pedagogical actions.

For educational institutions and policymakers, structured professional development programs should be designed to help English teachers effectively integrate multicultural values into their teaching. Such programs need to go beyond theoretical exposure by incorporating hands-on workshops that promote the development of locally grounded teaching materials and culturally responsive pedagogical strategies suited to the realities of Maluku.

At the classroom level, teachers are encouraged to engage in continuous reflection and peer collaboration to refine approaches that are more responsive to diversity. Partnerships among schools, parents, and local communities can further foster learning environments that sustain and celebrate multicultural values.

Finally, English curricula at the primary level should explicitly include content that reflects Indonesia's rich cultural heritage, with a particular emphasis on Maluku's local wisdom. Teaching materials showcasing linguistic and cultural diversity can strengthen students' sense of identity and help them perceive language learning as a bridge between global communication and local belonging.

In essence, this study highlights the need for a multi-layered approach—encompassing conceptual awareness, pedagogical readiness, and systemic support—so that multicultural education evolves from a mere discourse into a tangible practice within English language teaching in primary schools.

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