

English Language Teaching in Islamic Primary Education under Cambodia's MoEYS Curriculum

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Abstract

This study examines English language teaching practices in Islamic primary education under Cambodia's national curriculum, regulated by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). Conducted in an Islamic primary school within a Muslim-minority context, the study addresses the gap between national curriculum policy and classroom practice. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with school leaders and English teachers, and document analysis. The findings reveal that while English instruction generally aligns with national curriculum objectives, teachers actively adapt teaching materials, classroom strategies, and learning contexts to ensure cultural and religious appropriateness. Islamic values are implicitly integrated through teacher modeling and interaction patterns rather than through explicit religious instruction. From a policy implementation perspective, the findings demonstrate a clear gap between policy as intended and policy as implemented, with teachers functioning as key mediators who exercise professional discretion in enacting curriculum policy. This study contributes empirical insights into English language teaching in Islamic primary education within a secular national system. It highlights the importance of teacher agency in bridging policy demands and faith-based educational contexts.

Keywords: English language teaching; Islamic primary education; MoEYS curriculum; Muslim minority; Cambodia

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji praktik pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di pendidikan dasar Islam berdasarkan kurikulum nasional Kamboja yang dikeluarkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan, Pemuda, dan Olahraga (MoEYS). Penelitian dilakukan di sebuah sekolah dasar Islam dalam konteks minoritas Muslim dengan fokus pada kesenjangan antara kebijakan kurikulum nasional dan praktik pembelajaran di kelas. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi pembelajaran di kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan pimpinan sekolah dan guru Bahasa Inggris, serta analisis dokumen kurikulum dan perangkat pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris pada umumnya telah sesuai dengan tujuan kurikulum nasional, namun guru secara aktif melakukan adaptasi materi, strategi pembelajaran, dan konteks pengajaran agar selaras dengan nilai-nilai Islam. Integrasi nilai keislaman dilakukan secara implisit melalui keteladanan guru dan pola interaksi di kelas. Ditinjau dari perspektif implementasi kebijakan, temuan ini menunjukkan adanya kesenjangan antara kebijakan yang dirumuskan dan kebijakan yang dilaksanakan, dengan guru berperan sebagai aktor kunci dalam menjembatani tuntutan kurikulum nasional dan konteks pendidikan berbasis

keislaman.

Kata Kunci: pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris; pendidikan dasar Islam; kurikulum MoEYS; minoritas Muslim; Kamboja

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INTRODUCTION

English has become an integral component of primary education worldwide due to its function as a global lingua franca that provides access to knowledge, international communication, and future academic and professional mobility (Qizi, 2025). Early exposure to English has been shown to support young learners' linguistic development, cognitive growth, and intercultural awareness (Hui & Zeng, 2025). Consequently, many countries in Southeast Asia have positioned English as a strategic subject within their national education systems (Mahendara et al., 2025), including in Cambodia, where English is introduced at the primary level under the national curriculum regulated by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS).

In Cambodia, English language education is implemented across diverse educational institutions, including public schools, private schools, and faith-based schools (Thuon & Theang, 2024). Islamic schools represent a distinctive educational context because they operate under a secular national curriculum while simultaneously maintaining religious values and Islamic educational principles. For Muslim communities living as minorities, Islamic schools function not only as academic institutions but also as spaces for preserving religious identity and moral education (Rahmatullah et al., 2024; Shah, 2012). Consequently, English language teaching in Islamic primary education extends beyond linguistic instruction and involves the negotiation of cultural, moral, and identity-related considerations.

Previous studies on English Language Teaching (ELT) in primary education emphasize the importance of contextualized pedagogy, meaningful input, and learner engagement in supporting young learners' language development (Dao & Bui, 2025; Harashchuk, 2025). Research conducted in Islamic educational contexts further suggests that integrating moral and religious values into ELT can enhance student motivation and reduce cultural dissonance when learning a global language (Fathiyaturrahmah et al., 2025; Gumelar & Jubaedah, 2025; Nurhayati & Fibriani, 2024). These studies indicate that English classrooms in Islamic schools often function as sites where language learning and identity formation intersect.

However, the majority of empirical studies on ELT in Islamic education have been conducted in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and several Middle Eastern contexts (Erihadiana & Mahmud, 2025; Rizal, 2021; Yanda, 2023). In these settings, Islamic values are institutionally embedded within education systems and

curriculum frameworks, allowing religious principles to be structurally integrated into teaching practices. Consequently, findings from these contexts may not fully represent the realities of Islamic schools operating in Muslim-minority societies under secular national education policies.

Studies focusing on English education in Cambodia have largely examined public schools, teacher competence, language policy, or English instruction at secondary and tertiary levels (Christian & Bailey, 2021; Em, 2022; Hashim et al., 2014; Zein & Haing, 2017). Research on English teaching at the primary level remains limited, and investigations into Islamic or other faith-based schools are particularly scarce. As a result, there is little empirical evidence documenting how Islamic primary schools in Cambodia interpret and implement a secular national English curriculum while maintaining their religious identity.

This gap can be theoretically understood through the lens of policy implementation theory, particularly the distinction between policy as intended and policy as implemented. Seminal work by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) demonstrates that policy outcomes are rarely determined solely by formal policy design; instead, they are shaped by complex implementation processes, multiple actors, and local contexts (Pressman et al., 1973). In a similar vein, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1979) argue that successful policy implementation depends not only on clearly defined policy objectives but also on institutional capacity, local conditions, and the behavior of implementers (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979).

At the micro level, this study is further informed by Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level bureaucracy, which explains how frontline actors exercise discretion when implementing policies in everyday practice (Cuervo-cazurra et al., 2021; Lipsky, 2010; Yates, 1982). In educational settings, teachers function as street-level bureaucrats who inevitably adapt curriculum policies to respond to classroom realities, learner needs, and institutional values. In Islamic primary schools operating under a secular national curriculum, teachers play a central role in mediating between state policy requirements and faith-based educational goals.

From this perspective, the core issue addressed in this study is the policy-practice gap between the written national English curriculum mandated by MoEYS (policy as intended) and the actual classroom practices of English teaching in Islamic primary education (policy as implemented). This gap is not viewed as a policy failure, but as an inherent characteristic of policy enactment in complex, value-laden educational contexts. Understanding how this gap is navigated at the classroom level is essential for developing more inclusive and context-sensitive curriculum policies.

Positioned within the intersection of ELT, Islamic education, and policy implementation studies, this research extends existing scholarship on culturally responsive English teaching (Djamdjuri et al., 2023; Madkur et al., 2024), by focusing on a Muslim-minority context that remains underrepresented in the literature. The novelty of this study

lies in its explicit application of policy implementation theory to examine English language teaching in Islamic primary education under Cambodia's secular national curriculum.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how English language teaching is implemented within Cambodia's MoEYS curriculum in Islamic primary education, to explore teachers' pedagogical strategies for mediating between national curriculum demands and Islamic values, and to investigate students' responses to English learning in these contexts. Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to discussions on inclusive curriculum implementation, teacher agency, and English education in diverse sociocultural and religious settings.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine English language teaching practices in Islamic primary education under Cambodia's national curriculum. A descriptive qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to describe and interpret classroom practices, teacher adaptation, and student responses as they naturally occurred, without manipulating variables or testing hypotheses(Creswell & Creswell David, 2018). The research was conducted at An-Nikmah Samdech Techo Hun Sen Chumnik High School, focusing on its primary education level. The school implements the national curriculum regulated by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) while maintaining Islamic values as part of its institutional identity.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives (Patton, 2002). The research subjects included one school headmaster, one curriculum coordinator, two primary-level English teachers, and 15 primary school students. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations focused on teaching procedures, teacher-student interaction, classroom language use, and contextual adaptation of learning materials. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' perspectives on curriculum implementation, pedagogical strategies, and challenges in integrating English teaching within an Islamic primary school context. Relevant documents such as curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, and teaching materials were analyzed to support the observational and interview data.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. All qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to identify recurring patterns related to curriculum implementation, teacher adaptation, and student engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through data triangulation across observations, interviews, and documents, as well as member checking with selected participants (Ahmed, 2024; Enworo, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining institutional approval, securing informed consent from participants and their parents, and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this descriptive qualitative study reveal that a dynamic interaction between curriculum compliance and contextual adaptation characterizes English language teaching in Islamic primary education under Cambodia's national curriculum. Data from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis indicate that English instruction generally aligns with the objectives and basic competencies outlined in the national curriculum. Teachers consistently focused on foundational language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, simple sentence structures, and basic communicative expressions suitable for primary-level learners. This finding demonstrates that the national English curriculum is implemented as intended at the formal instructional level.

However, classroom practices indicate that curriculum implementation is not rigid. Observation data indicate that teachers frequently adapted instructional materials, examples, and learning activities to ensure cultural familiarity and moral appropriateness. Nationally recommended textbooks were used as the primary instructional resources. Yet, teachers modified dialogues, replaced culturally distant contexts, and simplified content to align with students' everyday experiences and the Islamic values upheld by the school. Islamic values such as politeness, respect, and discipline were embedded implicitly through teacher modeling and classroom interaction rather than presented as explicit lesson content. The key classroom observation findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Classroom Observation Findings

Observation Focus	Key Findings
Curriculum implementation	Lessons followed the national curriculum objectives for primary English, especially vocabulary and the use of simple sentences.
Teaching materials	National textbooks were used with contextual modifications to ensure cultural and moral appropriateness.
Teaching strategies	Modeling, repetition, and guided practice dominated classroom activities.
Integration of Islamic values	Values such as politeness, respect, and discipline were embedded implicitly through interaction and teacher modeling.
Teacher-student interaction	Teacher-guided interaction with structured opportunities for student participation.
Student engagement	Higher engagement was observed when activities related to familiar school routines and moral behaviors.
Classroom challenges	Limited availability of English materials tailored to Islamic primary education contexts.

Interview data further illuminate the reasoning behind these pedagogical adaptations. School leaders and English teachers acknowledged that the national curriculum does not explicitly accommodate religious or cultural diversity. As a result, teachers perceived curriculum adaptation as part of their professional responsibility rather than a formally guided institutional practice. Teachers relied on pedagogical experience, contextual knowledge of students, and professional judgment when implementing curriculum content. The main themes emerging from interviews are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Interview Findings

Participant	Main Themes Identified
Headmaster	Importance of balancing national curriculum compliance with Islamic school identity.
Curriculum coordinator	Flexibility in curriculum interpretation due to lack of faith-based guidance in national documents.
English teachers	Need to adapt materials and examples to students' cultural and moral context.
English teachers	Reliance on personal experience and creativity in material adaptation.
Students (informal responses)	Preference for learning activities connected to familiar routines and respectful interaction.

The relationship between curriculum policy and classroom practice is further clarified through Figure 1, which illustrates the observed flow of English language teaching practices in Islamic primary education. The figure shows that national curriculum objectives serve as the starting point for instruction. However, their realization in the classroom is mediated by teacher interpretation, material selection and adaptation, and instructional strategies such as modeling, repetition, and guided practice. Throughout this process, Islamic values are integrated implicitly, shaping both the learning environment and student engagement.

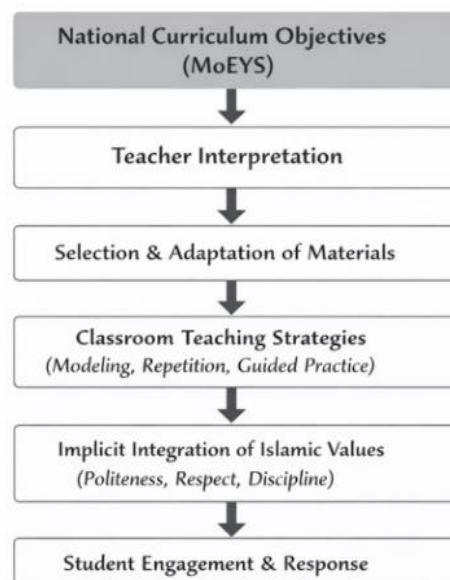


Figure 1. Flow of English language teaching practices in Islamic primary education under the national curriculum

Viewed through the lens of policy implementation theory, these findings reveal a clear gap between policy as intended and policy as implemented. Although the national English curriculum represents a standardized, secular policy framework, its

implementation in Islamic primary classrooms is shaped by local values, institutional identity, and teacher discretion. This finding aligns with the argument that policy outcomes are largely determined during implementation rather than at formulation. The contextual adaptations observed in this study support the view that policy effectiveness is influenced by local conditions and the behavior of implementing actors. At the classroom level, English teachers function as street-level bureaucrats, exercising professional judgment to reconcile curriculum demands with religious and cultural expectations.

Student responses observed during English lessons were predominantly positive, particularly when learning activities were meaningful and contextually relevant. Students demonstrated higher engagement in speaking and vocabulary exercises that reflected familiar classroom routines and socially appropriate behaviors. These findings suggest that contextual relevance and implicit value integration contribute to a supportive learning environment for young learners.

Despite these positive practices, the findings also reveal structural challenges in curriculum implementation. Teachers reported limited access to English teaching materials specifically designed for Islamic primary education contexts. Consequently, instructional quality and consistency depended heavily on individual teacher competence and creativity. This condition indicates that the national curriculum framework does not yet fully accommodate the needs of faith-based schools in Muslim-minority settings, placing a greater burden on teachers to bridge contextual gaps independently.

In answering the research questions, this study concludes that English language teaching under Cambodia's national curriculum in Islamic primary education is characterized by formal curriculum compliance alongside flexible, context-sensitive implementation. Teachers play a crucial role in negotiating between national policy requirements and the religious values upheld by the school community. The findings support and extend previous research on English language teaching in Islamic educational contexts by providing empirical evidence from a Muslim-minority country.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the policy-practice gap identified in this study should not be interpreted as a failure of curriculum policy. Instead, it reflects an inherent feature of policy enactment in complex, value-laden educational contexts. By highlighting how teachers mediate between policy intentions and classroom realities, this study contributes to broader discussions on inclusive curriculum implementation and context-sensitive English language education.

CONCLUSION

This descriptive qualitative study examined the implementation of English language teaching in Islamic primary education under Cambodia's national curriculum and explored the gap between curriculum policy and classroom practice. The findings indicate that English instruction in the observed Islamic primary school generally aligns with the formal objectives and competencies prescribed in the national curriculum. Teachers design lessons

and conduct classroom activities in accordance with national guidelines, demonstrating that the curriculum policy is recognized and implemented at the formal instructional level. At the same time, curriculum implementation in practice is not a mechanical reproduction of written policy. Teachers actively interpret and adapt curriculum content to ensure cultural relevance, pedagogical suitability, and alignment with Islamic values. Instructional materials are modified, examples are contextualized, and classroom interactions are shaped by moral norms upheld by the school community. Islamic values such as politeness, respect, and discipline are integrated implicitly through teacher modeling and classroom routines rather than through explicit religious instruction, enabling English learning to remain meaningful for students while preserving the school's religious identity.

From a policy implementation perspective, these findings confirm a clear gap between policy as intended and as implemented. While the national English curriculum represents a standardized, secular policy framework designed for uniform application, its implementation in Islamic primary classrooms is shaped by local institutional contexts and teacher discretion. This policy-practice gap should not be interpreted as a policy failure or resistance, but rather as an inherent characteristic of curriculum enactment in diverse, value-laden educational settings. Teacher agency emerges as a central factor in bridging this gap, as teachers serve as key mediators, translating curriculum mandates into classroom practices responsive to students' needs and institutional values. Contextualized instruction and implicit value integration enhance student engagement and classroom climate without compromising language-learning objectives. Overall, this study extends research on English language teaching and policy implementation by providing empirical evidence from a Muslim-minority context and underscores the need for more inclusive curriculum support and context-sensitive resources to help teachers navigate the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities.

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