# Voices from the Classrooms: Student and Teacher Responses on English Assessment Exclusion from the National Assessment

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#### Abstract

For many years, English has been a core subject in the National Examination (UN) across all levels of education, including Elementary, Junior High, and Senior High School. In 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Education introduced a new policy that replaced the UN with the National Assessment, which aims to evaluate students' proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills. However, notably, the government has excluded English from the subjects assessed at the Junior High School level. Consequently, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the omission of the English subject from the National Assessment. The research involved 3 English teachers and 43 students from a junior high school in Tebing Tinggi, North Sumatra, who had previously participated in the new assessment format. Data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews. Specifically, the questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while the interview data underwent analysis through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as outlined by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014). The findings reveal that both students and teachers believe that English should be reinstated in the National Assessment. Additionally, the exclusion of English elicits contrasting sentiments; while the majority of students express dissatisfaction, the teachers predominantly feel a sense of relief. Ultimately, this article discusses several considerations concerning the implementation of the National Assessment.

# INTRODUCTION

After seven consecutive years of serving as the benchmark for student graduation in Indonesia, the National Examination (*Ujian Nasional*, henceforth UN) was ultimately abolished from the educational framework and replaced by the National Assessment (*Asesmen Nasional*, henceforth AN) starting in 2021. This significant shift in policy aims primarily to foster improvements in educational quality and enhance student learning outcomes. The Minister of Education has articulated that the National Assessment is not merely a substitute for the National Examination; rather, it represents a paradigm shift in the approach to educational evaluation, indicating a broader commitment to developing a more effective and relevant assessment system (Pusmendik, 2022). This transition reflects

the government's ambition to ensure that assessments align more closely with contemporary educational goals, which prioritize not just these evaluations, but also the overall growth of students' critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities.

The National Assessment serves as a comprehensive mapping of the educational quality across a diverse range of institutions, including schools, madrasas, and equality programs at both elementary and secondary levels (Meriana & Murniarti, 2021; Perdana, 2021; Purwasih & Wahananto, 2022). Within the framework of the National Assessment, three distinct components are delineated: the Minimum Competency Assessment (*Asesmen Kompetensi Minimum*, henceforth AKM), the Character Survey, and the Learning Environment Survey. Of these components, the AKM plays a pivotal role as the replacement for the UN, specifically administered to students in grades V, VIII, and XI. Unlike its predecessor (the UN), the AKM does not determine students' graduation status. Instead, its design aims to generate critical information that can trigger substantial improvements in both teaching and learning processes, ultimately paving the way for enhanced student learning outcomes (Mustagfiroh, 2020; Fauziah et al., 2021; Perdana, 2021; Purwati et al., 2021; Bintang, 2022). This foundational shift emphasizes the necessity of qualitative evaluations that assist educators in identifying areas of improvement within their instructional methods.

The Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) is fundamentally an evaluation of the essential competencies required by students to develop their capabilities and contribute positively to society (Pusat Asesmen dan Pembelajaran, 2020). Specifically, the AKM measures two core competencies: reading literacy and mathematical literacy (numeracy). Reading literacy encompasses the ability to understand, utilize, evaluate, and reflect on various forms of written texts, fostering individual development and enabling meaningful societal contributions (Pumilia-Gnarini et al., 2012; Ningrum, 2021; Familiyana, 2022; Nurjati et al., 2022). Conversely, numeracy refers to the capacity to employ mathematical concepts, procedures, facts, and tools to address everyday problems in diverse contexts (Valiandes, 2015; Peters et al., 2017; Hasanah & Sholihah, 2017; Sari & Sayekti, 2022). In the context of the AKM, the competencies assessed in both reading literacy and numeracy include logical thinking skills, reasoning abilities utilizing learned concepts and knowledge, as well as proficiency in sorting and processing information (Hasanah & Hakim, 2021; Hasanah et al., 2021; Teresia, 2021; Adelia & Deta, 2022; Bintang, 2022). This comprehensive approach underscores the importance of equipping students with foundational skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Assessment activities encompass a wide range of methodologies employed to evaluate, measure, and document academic preparedness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or student needs (Stock et al., 1987; Stiggins, 1998; Kumano, 2001). On an international scale, renowned assessment instruments, such as the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), provide benchmarks for evaluating educational quality and student performance. According to the OECD (2018; see also IEA, 2019), Indonesia's performance has shown fluctuations, with a notable decline beginning in 2018. For

example, the reading proficiency scores dropped from 396 in 2012 to a concerning 371 in 2018. The Indonesian government has expressed significant concern regarding this decline in PISA scores, as it indicates the persistently low levels of literacy and numeracy among Indonesian learners compared to their international peers. Findings from PISA 2012 to 2018 reveal that Indonesian students consistently fall short of their counterparts in neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore, with respect to achieving basic literacy (Perdana, 2021). In response to this alarming trend, the Indonesian Ministry of Education has reformed the evaluation methods for assessing students' reading and numeracy skills through the National Assessment, aiming to strengthen the foundation of basic competencies among students (Fatriana, 2021; Fauziah et al., 2021; Hasanah & Hakim, 2021; Hidayah et al., 2021; Indahri, 2021; Bintang, 2022; Yamtinah et al., 2022). The establishment of the National Assessment, therefore, represents a strategic effort by the government to enhance the literacy and numeracy skills of Indonesian students, in order to ensure that they are adequately prepared to compete on a global scale.

The exclusion of English subjects from the National Assessment (AN) has generated considerable surprise and concern among English teachers within the educational community (see Auliya, 2022a; Auliya, 2022b). Historically, prior to its official abolition in 2021, the UN included English as a tested subject annually across all levels of education in Indonesia. This inclusion not only provided a measure of students' proficiency in the language, but also played an essential role in determining graduation for students at both primary and secondary education levels. However, since the implementation of the AN, English is no longer among the evaluated subjects, with all assessment questions in both literacy and numeracy presented exclusively in Indonesian. This shift has sparked a debate on the implications for students' multilingual competencies, particularly in a world where English is increasingly paramount for global communication.

In light of this context, the Indonesian government asserts that the framework for the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) emphasizes foundational skills, specifically literacy and numeracy, as essential competencies (Direktorat Guru Pendidikan Dasar, 2020; Direktorat Guru Pendidikan Menengah, 2020; Direktorat Guru Pendidikan Khusus, 2020; Meriana & Murniarti, 2021; Rachmawati, 2022). Moreover, the PISA framework, utilized by the government as a reference, focuses solely on reading, mathematics, science, financial literacy, and problem-solving, all of which are deemed necessary to enhance competitiveness in the global economy (Indahri, 2021; see also Breakspear, 2014). Nonetheless, this perspective raises questions about the role of other disciplines, including language education, which many argue are equally vital for a well-rounded curriculum that encompasses the humanities, arts, music, physical education, social sciences, world languages, history, and geography (Sjøberg, 2015). Thus, this study is designed to delve into the perceptions of English teachers and secondary-level students regarding the ramifications of excluding English from the National Assessment.

Although the National Assessment (AN) has only been implemented for several years and the subject of this study is relatively new in the educational discourse, numerous research endeavours have already explored various dimensions of the AN throughout Indonesia. Existing studies have examined students' and teachers' perceptions (Hasanah & Hakim, 2021; Auliya, 2022b; Familiyana, 2022; Herman et al., 2022; Rokhim et al., 2022) and their understandings (Fauziah et al., 2021) of the AKM, students' readiness for the assessment (Perdana, 2021), obstacles encountered during its implementation (Bintang, 2022), and the significance of AKM training for teachers (Meriana & Murniarti, 2021). Concerning perceptions, findings indicate that the implementation of the AN has generally garnered positive reactions from educators (Hasanah & Hakim, 2021; Familiyana, 2022; Herman et al., 2022), including feedback from English teachers (Auliya, 2022b), as well as from students (Rokhim et al., 2022). Regarding comprehension of the assessment framework, it has been noted that while all teachers possess a general understanding of the AKM, some lack clarity about the specific components of literacy and numeracy being evaluated (Fauziah et al., 2021). In terms of students' preparedness, research shows that many high school and vocational students feel inadequately prepared for the AKM, expressing concerns that the questions do not align with the materials taught in their classrooms (Perdana, 2021). Moreover, challenges during the AN's implementation were identified, such as issues related to school infrastructure, internet connectivity, institutional readiness, and students' motivation to learn (Bintang, 2022). Additionally, the necessity of AKM training for teachers emerged as an important factor, suggesting that such training could profoundly influence the development of learning frameworks and significantly enhance educators' engagement in delivering quality instruction to their students (Meriana & Murniarti, 2021).

Despite the extensive research conducted in these areas, studies specifically examining the responses of students and teachers to the omission of English from the National Assessment (AN) remain scarce. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap, providing critical insights into how key stakeholders in education perceive the exclusion of the English subject and its implications for teaching and learning within the Indonesian context.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study applied the mixed method research (Creswell & Clark, 2011) where both quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilized in the data collection, which is through the survey and interview methods. The survey was conducted through a questionnaire distributed to 43 junior high school students, while the interviews were carried out to five of the students and also three English teachers from the same school. The questionnaire was designed in Likert Scale's four level responses of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). This study took place at a public junior high school in Tebing Tinggi, North Sumatra. In analysing the questionnaire data,

the descriptive statistics were adopted, while to analyse the interview data, the data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as proposed by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) were administered.

### **RESULTS**

# 1. Students' Responses

With reference to the students' responses on the absence of English assessment from the AKM, the results of questionnaire data analysis ascertain that most of the students, i.e. 97,7% of the respondents value that English assessment should be included in the National Assessment, while the other 2,3% disagree to this statement. This result is displayed in this following table.

Table 1 Frequency of Students' Perception that English Assessment should be Included in the AKM

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	14	32,6%
Agree	28	65,1%
Disagree	1	2,3%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	43	100%

This outcome is supported by the results of data interview, where all of the five of student participants state that English should not be omitted from the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM), due to the essential role of English as the world's language. Thus, it can be derived that students perceive that English assessment should be included in the AKM.

Meanwhile, in regard to how the students feel about the non-existence of English assessment in the AKM, it is divulged from the questionnaire that 42% feel happy with the absence of English, while the other 58% react vice versa. This result can be seen in this table below.

Table 2 Frequency of Students' Feeling Happy about the Absence of English Assessment from the AKM

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	21%
Agree	9	21%
Disagree	19	44%
Strongly Disagree	6	14%
Total	43	100%

This outcome is quite interesting, remembering even though they believe that English is important to be involved in the AKM, yet quite many of them (42%, which is almost

half of the participants) feel glad about the exclusion of the subject from the AKM. However, the fact that most of the students, i.e. 58% of the participants show negative reaction to this idea is in line with the interview results. From the interview, it is known that all of the students feel unhappy that English subject is kept out from the AKM, as they apparently favor the subject.

In addition to that, the absence of English from the AKM has made the students feel that this assessment has become easier to do. As for this, 56% of the student respondents manifest positive reaction to this, as presented in this following table.

Table 3 Frequency of Students' Feeling that the AKM is Easier due to the Absence of English Assessment

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	8	18,7%
Agree	16	37,3%
Disagree	19	44%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	43	100%

This result of the questionnaire goes along with the result of the interview in which all of the student participants agree that without English questions, the AKM, especially the literacy aspect, is easier to do.

In the meantime, about the importance of English to be learned and mastered by students in junior high school, it was unveiled from the data analysis of the questionnaire that all of the students or 100% of them have absolute agreement on this. This result is depicted in this table below.

Table 4 Frequency of Students' Thinking that English is important to be learned and mastered

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	22	51,1%
Agree	21	48,9%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Total	43	100%

This positive reaction is in alignment with what the interview unfolds, that all of the students manifest that English is crucial to be learned and mastered by students in the level of junior high school.

### 2. Teachers' Responses

The investigation into teachers' perceptions regarding the exclusion of English from the National Assessment was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The findings from these interviews reveal that English teachers express a sense of disappointment concerning the omission of English, given its pivotal role as a global lingua franca. The

teachers articulate concerns that the exclusion of English from the AN may hinder their students' ability to compete on an international scale, as it may inadvertently diminish the perceived importance of English proficiency. Furthermore, the teachers contend that the government should not overlook the significance of English knowledge and skills when establishing the AN as a benchmark for evaluating the quality of education in Indonesia.

However, conversely, the assurance that students' English skills are no longer subject to governmental assessment has provided a measure of relief for English teachers. During the interviews, it was acknowledged that the participating teachers felt alleviated from the pressure to compel students to achieve proficiency in English, as the subject is no longer deemed mandatory. Consequently, English is perceived as holding a status comparable to other subjects, such as physical education and the arts, within the academic curriculum.

### **DISCUSSIONS**

The analysis of data obtained from questionnaires and interviews reveals that both students and teachers exhibit negative responses toward the exclusion of English from the National Assessment (AN). The consensus among participants suggests that English should be re-integrated into the AN, primarily due to its critical role as a global lingua franca (Jenkins, 2012; Foley & Deocampo, 2016; Fang, 2017; Rao, 2019; Ilyosovna, 2020), which necessitates its mastery by students (Saputra et al., 2017; Romadhon et al., 2018; Wijayanti, 2019; Harianto, 2021; Ansow et al., 2022). The students' acknowledged importance of English aligns with their perception that it warrants inclusion in the AN, suggesting a rationale for their views regarding its necessity in the assessment.

A noteworthy finding is the divergent reactions elicited by the absence of English from the AN between students and teachers. While the majority of students express dissatisfaction, believing that this omission may disadvantage them, English teachers report a sense of relief. This reaction from teachers is understandable, considering the pressures faced previously to rigorously prepare students for the National Examination (UN) by intensively drilling and administering practice questions. Consequently, the implementation of the AN, excluding English, aligns with observations by Auliya (2022a), indicating that English teachers generally exhibit greater contentment with the reduced assessment pressures.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that policymakers reconsider the current implementation of the National Assessment. Although literacy and numeracy are vital competencies, they should not overshadow the comprehensive educational objectives for students. Drawing solely on official PISA results as the foundation for policy decisions in Indonesia may lead to a distorted educational focus (see Breakspear, 2014; Sjøberg, 2015). PISA's narrow emphasis on economic growth and competitiveness evaluates primarily those skills deemed critical for enhancing global economic

participation—namely reading, mathematics, science, financial literacy, and problem-solving (Indahri, 2021). However, this perspective overlooks the broader array of skills and values that students should acquire, including proficiency in English. Educational objectives should encompass a wider array of developmental goals beyond mere economic preparation, suggesting that PISA should not serve as the sole reference point in educational policymaking.

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