# BEYOND AWARENESS: EXPLORING LOWER PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHERS' READINESS FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ENGLISH TEACHING

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**Abstract**

The increasing cultural diversity of English classrooms requires teachers to develop readiness for Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). However, existing research has primarily focused on classroom implementation, with limited attention to how teachers construct professional readiness for culturally responsive pedagogy. This study explores how lower primary English teachers make sense of CRT and how their interpretations shape their readiness to implement culturally responsive English teaching in Indonesian elementary schools. Employing an interpretivist qualitative design, the study involved twelve lower primary English teachers from four public and private elementary schools in Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings revealed that teachers' readiness for culturally responsive English teaching is a developmental process rather than a fixed professional competence. Three interconnected themes emerged: (1) developing awareness of student diversity without explicit CRT understanding, (2) emerging attempts to contextualize English learning through students' everyday experiences, and (3) developing readiness shaped by professional needs and contextual constraints. The findings further indicate that teachers frequently enacted culturally responsive practices intuitively despite lacking explicit conceptual knowledge of CRT. This study proposes teachers' professional meaning-making as a conceptual lens explaining how readiness develops through awareness of diversity, emerging CRT understanding, contextual negotiation of teaching practices, and implementation readiness. The study contributes to the growing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy by extending teacher sense-making theory and highlights the importance of integrating explicit CRT knowledge, reflective practice, and contextualized professional learning into teacher education and continuous professional development.

**Keywords:** culturally responsive teaching (CRT), teacher readiness, professional meaning-making, english language teaching, lower primary education, teacher sense-making, cultural diversity, qualitative research, indonesia, reflexive thematic analysis

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), digital technologies, and globalization has transformed educational systems worldwide, requiring schools to respond not only to technological innovation but also to increasingly diverse cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. This challenge is particularly evident in English Language Teaching (ELT), where language learning is closely connected to learners' identities, cultural values, and lived experiences. Consequently, effective English instruction extends beyond linguistic competence by recognizing and integrating students' diverse cultural resources into classroom practices. Within this context, Culturally Responsive

Teaching (CRT) has been widely recognized as an inclusive pedagogical framework that promotes educational equity by connecting curriculum, instruction, and assessment with students' cultural experiences, thereby fostering meaningful engagement and improved learning outcomes (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Johnson & Elliott, 2020)

Over the past decade, CRT has evolved into one of the most influential frameworks for promoting educational equity in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014). Systematic reviews indicate that CRT research has expanded considerably, particularly in curriculum contextualization, culturally responsive instructional practices, teacher–student relationships, and teachers' cultural competence (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024). Within ELT, scholars emphasize that language teaching should integrate learners' cultural identities, multilingual experiences, and local knowledge to foster meaningful communication and intercultural competence (Hidayati et al., 2024; Istiadi & Yuliati, 2026). Nevertheless, existing studies remain largely implementation-oriented, focusing on classroom strategies rather than on how teachers develop the professional knowledge and competencies necessary for culturally responsive pedagogy (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024).

This limitation is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where educational reforms, including the Merdeka Curriculum, increasingly promote inclusive and culturally responsive learning. However, recent reviews suggest that CRT implementation remains uneven because of limited professional preparation, contextual adaptation, and sustained pedagogical support for teachers (Istiadi & Yuliati, 2026; Setiawan et al., 2026). Moreover, empirical qualitative studies examining how lower primary English teachers understand, interpret, and prepare to implement CRT in Indonesian elementary schools remain scarce (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024; Setiawan et al., 2026). Addressing this gap is essential for understanding teachers' professional learning processes and informing teacher education and professional development.

In response, this study explores how lower primary English teachers make sense of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and how their interpretations shape their readiness to enact culturally responsive English teaching in Indonesian elementary schools. Guided by teacher sense-making theory, which explains that teachers construct meaning by interpreting new pedagogical ideas through their prior knowledge, beliefs,

experiences, and professional contexts (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Chalkley et al., 2022; Spillane et al., 2002), this qualitative study focuses on teachers' professional learning processes rather than the implementation of specific instructional strategies. Accordingly, it proposes teachers' professional meaning-making of CRT as a conceptual lens for understanding how cultural awareness, conceptual understanding, contextual negotiation, and pedagogical readiness are progressively developed. The findings are expected to enrich the theoretical discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy, provide empirical evidence from the underexplored context of lower primary English education in Indonesia, and offer practical implications for teacher education, continuous professional development, and the development of more equitable and culturally responsive English language learning environments.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study used an interpretivist qualitative design to examine how lower-primary English teachers in Indonesian elementary schools construct professional meaning around Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The interpretivist stance suited the study's aim to capture teachers' subjective interpretations, experiences, and context-dependent perspectives rather than to test causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriem & Tisdell, 2015). It allowed an in-depth look at how teachers' understandings of CRT emerge through interactions with diverse learners, school environments, and teaching practice, recognizing that culturally responsive pedagogical capacity is socially and contextually shaped (Spillane et al., 2002).

The research sampled twelve English teachers of Grades 1–3 from four elementary schools (two public, two private) in Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java. Focusing on teachers' meaning-making, the study explored how they interpret cultural diversity, form conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, and negotiate its implementation in their specific teaching contexts. Data were collected between July and December 2025. Participants were purposively selected as information-rich cases based on these inclusion criteria: teaching Grades 1–3 English, at least one year of elementary teaching experience, and voluntary participation. Participant demographics and professional profiles appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profile of Participants

| Participant | School Type | Gender | Educational Background | Teaching Experience | Grade(s) Taught |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T1 | Public | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 8 years | Grade 1 |
| T2 | Public | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 6 years | Grade 2 |
| T3 | Public | Male | B.Ed. in English Education | 12 years | Grade 3 |
| T4 | Public | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 5 years | Grades 1–2 |
| T5 | Public | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 7 years | Grade 3 |
| T6 | Public | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 4 years | Grade 2 |
| T7 | Private | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 9 years | Grade 1 |
| T8 | Private | Male | B.Ed. in English Education | 10 years | Grade 2 |
| T9 | Private | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 6 years | Grade 3 |
| T10 | Private | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 5 years | Grades 1–3 |
| T11 | Private | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 11 years | Grade 2 |
| T12 | Private | Female | B.Ed. in English Education | 8 years | Grade 3 |

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with the twelve participants, each lasting about 30–45 minutes and scheduled at times and places convenient for them. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The open-ended interview protocol invited teachers to reflect on their experiences, interpretations, and classroom practices related to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT).

Transcripts were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six iterative phases: familiarisation, initial coding, constructing potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The researcher maintained reflexive engagement throughout to interpret how teachers constructed meanings of CRT in their specific school contexts. This method was chosen because it highlights recurring patterns of meaning while acknowledging the researcher's active interpretive role (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reflexive thematic analysis showed that lower-primary English teachers' readiness for Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is still emerging. While teachers

were aware of student diversity and wanted to create meaningful English lessons, most lacked a clear, comprehensive understanding of CRT as a pedagogical framework. They tended to equate CRT with knowing student characteristics, making classrooms comfortable, and adjusting materials to proficiency levels rather than grounding instruction in students' cultural identities, lived experiences, and social backgrounds.

Readiness for culturally responsive English teaching appeared as a gradual, developmental process: teachers stood between basic awareness of diversity and an emerging capacity to enact CRT. Three interconnected themes captured this process: (1) awareness of student diversity without an explicit grasp of CRT, (2) initial efforts to localize English learning via students' experiences, and (3) developing readiness influenced by professional needs and contextual constraints.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes of Teachers' Professional Meaning-Making of Culturally Responsive Teaching

| No | Theme | Subthemes | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Developing awareness of student diversity without explicit CRT understanding | Recognizing individual differences; understanding students' characteristics | Teachers acknowledged diversity but had limited conceptual understanding of CRT |
| 2 | Emerging attempts to contextualize English learning through students' experiences | Using familiar examples; connecting lessons with students' daily lives | Teachers applied culturally related practices intuitively without explicit CRT frameworks |
| 3 | Developing readiness shaped by professional needs and contextual constraints | Need for CRT knowledge; limited professional support; curriculum considerations | Teachers showed willingness to implement CRT but required further professional development |

The first theme shows that teachers generally acknowledged the need to understand students' backgrounds, abilities, and learning differences. They saw students as individuals shaped by varied experiences and family contexts that matter for English

teaching. Yet most teachers said they were not familiar with the specific idea of Culturally Responsive Teaching and had not received formal training on it.

Teachers tended to equate cultural responsiveness with sound general classroom practices—paying attention to student needs, treating learners fairly, and making lessons enjoyable. Although these attitudes are positive, participants had not fully linked them to CRT's core principles, which require explicitly using students' cultural identities and lived experiences as a base for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

One participant explained:

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|---|---|
| Data | "Selama ini saya belum pernah mendengar istilah Culturally Responsive Teaching. Yang saya pahami, guru harus mengenal karakter siswa, memahami kemampuan mereka, dan membuat pembelajaran yang nyaman bagi semua siswa." (T1) |
| English Equivalent | "I have never heard the term Culturally Responsive Teaching before. What I understand is that teachers need to know students' characteristics, understand their abilities, and create a comfortable learning environment for all students." (T1) |

Another teacher stated:

| | |
|---|---|
| Data | "Menurut saya semua siswa harus diperlakukan sama tanpa membedakan latar belakang mereka. Tetapi kalau mengaitkan budaya siswa dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, saya belum terlalu memahami caranya." (T5) |
| English Equivalent | "In my opinion, all students should be treated equally regardless of their backgrounds. However, I do not yet fully understand how to integrate students' cultures into English learning." (T5) |

These accounts indicate that teachers possessed initial awareness of student diversity; however, their understanding remained at a general pedagogical level rather than developing into an explicit conceptual understanding of CRT.

The second theme indicates that, despite limited theoretical knowledge of CRT, teachers began to show culturally responsive tendencies in their classroom practice. They

tried to make English lessons more meaningful by using examples, topics, and activities drawn from students' everyday lives.

Teachers often used familiar contexts, family, school settings, local objects, and daily routines, to help lower-primary pupils understand concepts, since young learners need concrete, relatable content. These efforts were helpful, but mainly stemmed from teachers' own experiences and intuitive choices rather than from an intentional application of CRT principles.

A teacher described:

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|---|---|
| Data | "Kalau mengajar anak kelas rendah, saya biasanya menggunakan contoh yang dekat dengan kehidupan mereka, misalnya keluarga, benda di sekitar sekolah, atau kegiatan sehari-hari supaya mereka lebih mudah memahami bahasa Inggris." (T7) |
| English Equivalent | "When teaching English to lower primary students, I usually use examples that are close to their lives, such as family, objects around the school, or daily activities, so they can understand the materials more easily." (T7) |

Another participant added:

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|---|---|
| Data | "Saya sering menggunakan lingkungan sekitar sebagai contoh pembelajaran, tetapi sebelumnya saya tidak mengetahui bahwa hal tersebut berkaitan dengan pendekatan yang memperhatikan budaya siswa." (T3) |
| English Equivalent | "I often connect learning materials with students' experiences, for example when learning about family members or their surroundings. However, I did not previously realize that this was related to culturally responsive learning." (T3) |

These findings suggest that some culturally responsive practices were already present in teachers' classrooms; however, the practices had not yet been framed within a conscious CRT perspective. This indicates a gap between teachers' intuitive practices and their theoretical understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy.

The third theme emphasizes that teachers' readiness to apply CRT was still evolving and shaped by professional and contextual constraints. While teachers were generally willing to bring students' cultural backgrounds into English lessons, they felt they needed

more knowledge, concrete examples, and professional support to turn CRT ideas into systematic classroom practices.

Participants reported specific challenges: limited familiarity with CRT strategies, scarce teaching resources, heavy curriculum demands, and few professional development opportunities. These obstacles appeared in both public and private schools, indicating that readiness depended less on school type and more on teachers' access to knowledge and sustained professional learning.

A public school teacher explained:

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| Data | "Sebenarnya saya tertarik untuk memasukkan budaya atau pengalaman siswa dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, tetapi saya masih membutuhkan contoh kegiatan yang sesuai untuk siswa kelas rendah." (T9) |
| English Equivalent | "I am interested in incorporating students' cultures or experiences into English learning, but I still need examples of appropriate activities for lower primary students." (T9) |

Similarly, a private school teacher stated:

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| Data | "Kami lebih banyak mengikuti buku dan target pembelajaran yang sudah ditentukan. Untuk memasukkan aspek budaya siswa mungkin bisa dilakukan, tetapi kami masih membutuhkan pelatihan agar lebih yakin menerapkannya." (T11) |
| English Equivalent | "We mostly follow the textbooks and predetermined learning targets. Integrating students' cultural aspects may be possible, but we still need training to feel more confident in implementing it." (T11) |

These findings demonstrate that teachers' readiness for CRT should be understood as an evolving professional capacity. Teachers were not resistant to culturally responsive approaches; rather, they were in a developmental stage where increased conceptual understanding and professional support were needed to strengthen their capacity for implementation.

Overall, the findings indicate that lower primary English teachers had developed initial awareness of student diversity, but this awareness had not yet fully progressed into explicit CRT understanding and confident implementation readiness. The gap between

awareness and readiness suggests that culturally responsive teaching capacity develops gradually through teachers' meaning-making processes, professional reflection, and contextual support.

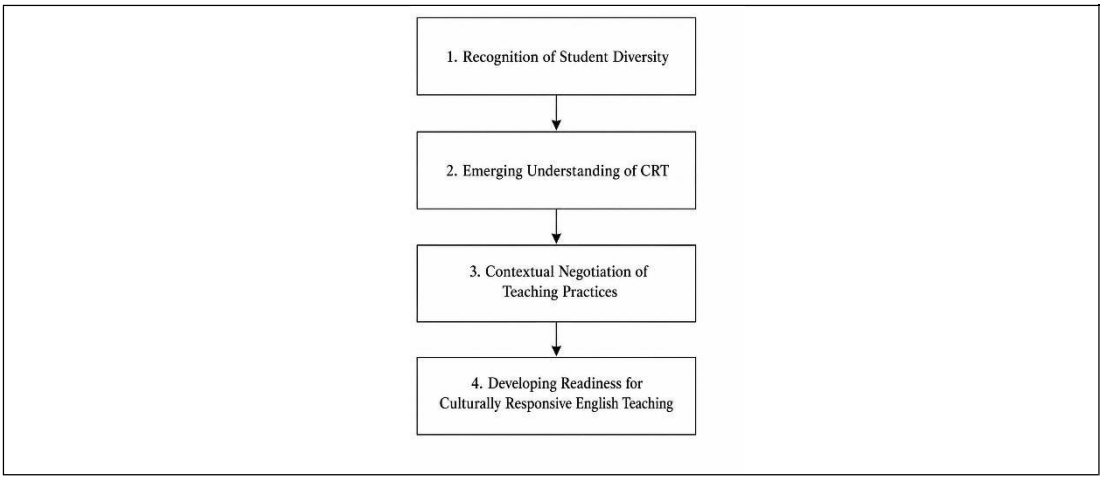



Figure 1. Teachers' Professional Meaning-Making Process toward Culturally Responsive English Teaching

Figure 1 summarizes the findings of this study by illustrating teachers' professional meaning-making process toward culturally responsive English teaching. The process begins with recognizing students' cultural diversity, followed by an emerging understanding of culturally responsive teaching (CRT), contextual negotiation of teaching practices, and the development of readiness to implement culturally responsive English teaching. Although presented sequentially, the process is dynamic and shaped by teachers' ongoing reflection and classroom experiences.

The findings demonstrate that lower primary English teachers' readiness for culturally responsive English teaching is not a fixed professional competence but a gradual professional meaning-making process. Although participants recognized student diversity, most had not yet developed an explicit conceptual understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). This finding supports teacher sense-making theory, which explains that teachers construct the meaning of new pedagogical ideas through their prior knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and professional contexts (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Chalkley et al., 2022; Spillane et al., 2002). It also extends previous CRT research by showing that readiness develops through professional interpretation before classroom

implementation (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024).

Despite their limited familiarity with CRT, teachers demonstrated culturally responsive orientations by connecting English lessons with students' daily experiences and local contexts. However, these practices were largely intuitive rather than grounded in explicit CRT knowledge. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that teachers often implement culturally responsive practices without recognizing them as CRT (Hossain, 2024; Istiadi & Yuliati, 2026). As argued by Gay (2018), Hammond (2015), and Ladson-Billings (2021), CRT requires the intentional integration of students' cultural identities and experiences into pedagogical decision-making, suggesting that participants had only partially enacted its broader principles.

Teachers' readiness was further shaped by the interaction between professional aspirations and contextual realities. Although participants expressed willingness to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into English learning, they identified limited CRT knowledge, insufficient professional development, curriculum demands, and limited teaching resources as key challenges. These findings reinforce the view that teacher learning is socially and contextually constructed through reflection and adaptation rather than knowledge acquisition alone (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002). Similar responses across public and private schools also indicate that readiness depends more on professional learning opportunities than school type.

This study contributes to the CRT literature by conceptualizing teachers' professional meaning-making as a developmental process linking awareness of student diversity, emerging CRT understanding, contextual negotiation of teaching practices, and implementation readiness. Unlike previous studies focusing primarily on CRT implementation or teacher competence (Alamsyah et al., 2025; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024; Setiawan et al., 2026), this study highlights how readiness is constructed before implementation. The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates this progression and extends teacher sense-making theory by explaining how teachers transform awareness into pedagogical readiness through reflection and contextual interpretation.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening culturally responsive English teaching requires more than raising teachers' awareness of diversity. Teacher education and professional development should foster explicit CRT understanding, reflective

practice, and contextualized learning experiences to support teachers' professional meaning-making and enhance culturally responsive English teaching in lower primary classrooms.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that lower primary English teachers' readiness for culturally responsive English teaching is a developmental process rather than a fixed professional competence. Although teachers recognized student diversity, they generally lacked an explicit understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) while demonstrating emerging culturally responsive practices through contextualized English learning. Readiness developed through a professional meaning-making process involving awareness of diversity, emerging CRT understanding, contextual negotiation, and implementation readiness.

This study contributes to the CRT literature by proposing teachers' professional meaning-making as a conceptual lens for understanding how readiness is constructed before classroom implementation. The findings underscore the need to integrate explicit CRT knowledge, reflective practice, and contextualized professional learning into teacher education and professional development. Future research should examine this process across different educational settings and cultural contexts.

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