

Teachers' Perspectives on Academic Ability Test Implementation concerning National Education Regulations

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Abstract

The Academic Ability Test (*Tes Kemampuan Akademik/TKA*), mandated by Regulation of the Ministry of Education and Culture Number 045/H/AN/2025, aims to standardize academic assessment in Indonesian senior high and vocational schools. This study examines teachers' perspectives on TKA implementation, focusing on teachers' understanding of the regulation, students' readiness, and students' attitudes toward the test. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected from four senior high school teachers in Palembang through a structured 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The results indicate varying levels of teacher understanding, despite general procedural compliance through try-outs and dress rehearsals. Students' readiness was perceived as moderate, with psychological pressure and difficulties in higher-order thinking tasks identified as key challenges. Overall, students demonstrated positive attitudes toward the TKA, though some showed low motivation. The study highlights that successful TKA implementation requires strengthened teacher assessment literacy, student psychological support, and instructional alignment with assessment demands.

Keywords: Academic Ability Test, Educational Assessment, Students' Readiness, Teachers' Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Educational assessment plays a central role in ensuring quality, equity, and accountability within national education systems. In Indonesia, large-scale assessment reform has become a strategic priority in response to persistent disparities in learning outcomes across regions, school types, and socio-economic backgrounds. Previous studies indicate that decentralized assessment practices have contributed to inconsistencies in academic standards and limited comparability of student achievement nationwide (Suryadarma et al., 2019). In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced Regulation Number 045/H/AN/2025, which formally establishes the Academic Ability Test (*Tes Kemampuan Akademik/TKA*) as a standardized national assessment for senior high schools (SMA/MA) and vocational schools (SMK/MAK).

The TKA represents a significant shift in Indonesia's assessment policy landscape. Unlike previous examinations that were often perceived as high-stakes graduation requirements, the TKA is designed primarily as an instrument for academic mapping, quality assurance, and policy evaluation rather than as a determinant of student graduation (Kemdikbudristek, 2025). Its implementation aims to provide nationally comparable data on students' academic competencies, thereby supporting evidence-based decision-making at school, regional, and national levels. This approach aligns with international trends that emphasize the use of standardized assessments as diagnostic and developmental tools, rather than punitive mechanisms (OECD, 2024).

Conceptually, the TKA is grounded in competency-based assessment principles that prioritize higher-order thinking skills, analytical reasoning, and meaningful application of knowledge. These principles align with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which aims to promote student-centered learning, critical thinking, creativity, and autonomy (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). The alignment between curriculum and assessment is intended to ensure coherence across instructional objectives, classroom practices, and evaluation standards. However, research suggests that achieving such alignment requires substantial shifts in pedagogical approaches and assessment literacy among teachers (Popham, 2022; Brookhart, 2023).

English is one of the core subjects assessed within the TKA framework, with a particular emphasis on reading comprehension. The English component is designed to assess students' ability to comprehend a range of text types, including descriptive, narrative, recount, procedural, and analytical exposition texts. These texts are structured to measure multiple cognitive levels, from literal understanding to inferential and evaluative reasoning. This design reflects alignment with international language assessment frameworks, particularly the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which emphasizes functional language use and cognitive processing in authentic contexts (Council of Europe, 2020). Such alignment signals Indonesia's commitment to global standards in educational assessment.

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Despite its policy significance, the implementation of the TKA presents complex challenges at the school level, particularly for teachers who are responsible for preparing students and operationalizing assessment guidelines. Studies in assessment reform consistently highlight that teachers' understanding of policy objectives, assessment constructs, and scoring implications is critical to successful implementation (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2022). When teachers lack sufficient assessment literacy, standardized tests may be treated merely as administrative obligations rather than as tools to inform instruction and support student learning (Brookhart, 2023).

In addition to teacher-related factors, students' readiness and attitudes toward standardized assessments play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of assessment implementation. Research indicates that students' psychological readiness, including anxiety levels and motivation, can significantly influence test performance, particularly in assessments perceived as high-stakes (Putwain, 2020). Although the TKA is not officially linked to graduation, widespread perceptions among students and parents regarding its potential impact on university admission may heighten test-related pressure. Such conditions underscore the importance of effective communication, school socialization, and emotional support mechanisms to ensure that assessments accurately reflect students' academic abilities rather than stress-related limitations (UNESCO, 2023).

Teachers occupy a strategic position at the intersection of policy, instruction, and student experience. Their perceptions of the TKA—regarding its purpose, implementation procedures, and impact on students—provide valuable insights into the strengths and limitations of the policy's early implementation. Understanding teachers' perspectives is particularly important during the initial stages of assessment reform, as early experiences often shape long-term acceptance, instructional alignment, and sustainability of policy initiatives (Fullan, 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to examine teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the Academic Ability Test in accordance with national education regulations. Specifically, the study explores three key dimensions: (1) teachers' understanding of TKA regulations, (2) teachers' perceptions of students' readiness for the assessment, and (3) students' attitudes toward the TKA as observed by teachers. By focusing on senior high school teachers in Palembang, this study contributes empirical evidence to the growing discourse on assessment reform in Indonesia and offers practical implications for strengthening teacher assessment literacy, student support systems, and curriculum–assessment alignment.

Standardized academic assessments are widely recognized as essential tools for promoting fairness, quality, and accountability in education systems. In Indonesia, implementation of the TKA aims to address long-standing disparities arising from regional differences in curriculum interpretation and assessment practices (World Bank; Suryadarma et al., 2019). Research emphasizes that national standardization is crucial for ensuring equal learning opportunities and comparable measures of student achievement (Mulyasa, 2020).

In language assessment, the emphasis on reading comprehension within the TKA reflects alignment with international frameworks such as the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020). Multiple text types and cognitive levels—ranging from literal to evaluative comprehension—enable a comprehensive measurement of students' linguistic abilities, which is consistent with global best practices in assessment design (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2022).

Curriculum alignment literature stresses that competency-based assessments must connect closely with instructional practices to be effective. The Kurikulum Merdeka encourages analytical thinking, creativity, and autonomy in learning; however, shifts toward higher-order cognitive tasks require teachers to adopt new pedagogical approaches (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). Valid and reliable assessments should therefore reflect these competencies, incorporating diverse formats and cognitive demands (Popham, 2022).

Studies also highlight the critical role of teacher assessment literacy and professional development in ensuring the successful implementation of large-scale assessments (Brookhart, 2023). Without adequate training, teachers may approach assessments merely as administrative tasks rather than tools for improving learning. International evidence demonstrates that effective communication and school socialization strengthen student understanding and acceptance of standardized assessments (UNESCO, 2023).

This literature establishes the importance of aligning regulatory frameworks, teacher practices, and student preparedness—core themes explored in this study on TKA implementation.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the TKA. Four senior high school teachers in Palembang were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in TKA preparation and administration. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 Likert-scale items measuring three domains: (1) teachers' knowledge of TKA regulations, (2) students' perceived readiness, and (3) students' attitudes toward the test. The data were analyzed descriptively to reveal patterns and variations within teachers' responses.

FINDINGS

Teachers' Knowledge of TKA Regulations

Findings indicate that teachers demonstrated varying levels of understanding regarding TKA regulations. Although all participating schools conducted dress rehearsals and try-outs in compliance with policy requirements, some teachers exhibited limited comprehension of deeper regulatory objectives such as assessment validity and competency alignment. This suggests strong procedural compliance but uneven conceptual understanding—a pattern consistent with early-stage implementation of new educational policies (Fullan, 2023).

Students' Perceived Readiness

Teachers generally perceived students' readiness for the TKA as moderate. Although students were familiar with the examination format through school-provided try-outs, they continued to struggle with psychological pressure and cognitive demands. Teachers reported that test anxiety was common, particularly because students believed TKA scores could influence university admission prospects. This aligns with research showing that high-stakes performances often lead to increased anxiety and reduced performance (Putwain, 2020).

Cognitively, students experienced challenges with analytical and reasoning-based items, especially those requiring higher-order thinking skills. Many students were accustomed to rote-based learning approaches, creating a mismatch between classroom practices and the cognitive rigor of the TKA. Similar findings are noted by Brookhart (2023) and Popham (2022), who argue that assessment formats requiring critical thinking demand corresponding instructional shifts.

Students' Attitudes Toward the TKA

Overall, teachers reported that students' attitudes toward the TKA were positive. Students generally viewed the test as an opportunity for self-evaluation rather than a punitive measure, particularly after receiving clear explanations from teachers regarding its purpose. Transparent communication is known to shape positive assessment perceptions (Brown & Harris, 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

Students were observed to be cooperative and responsible during TKA preparation activities such as try-outs. However, a minority exhibited indifference, particularly those who perceived the test as having minimal effect on their academic progression. Teachers noted that students' motivation increased when they received feedback, reflecting expectancy-value theory, which emphasizes the role of perceived usefulness in shaping engagement (Wigfield & Eccles, 2020).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a multidimensional understanding of how teachers perceive the early implementation of the Academic Ability Test (Tes Kemampuan Akademik/TKA) within the regulatory framework of Indonesian national education. Although the schools involved in the study demonstrated a high level of procedural compliance—including the administration of dress rehearsals (*gladi bersih*), trial tests, and policy socialization—there remain notable gaps in conceptual understanding, pedagogical alignment, and student-level readiness. These findings reflect broader tensions often observed during the initial adoption of new large-scale assessments, where institutional structures adjust more rapidly than instructional practices and psychological supports for students.

A major theme emerging from the findings is the disparity between procedural compliance and conceptual comprehension among teachers. While teachers effectively followed mandated steps in the regulation, some lacked deeper knowledge regarding assessment validity, reliability, competency alignment, and the diagnostic purpose of the TKA. This phenomenon has been widely documented in global assessment reform literature. Fullan (2023) notes that compliance-driven reform often results in superficial adoption of policies without meaningful pedagogical change. Similarly, Darling-Hammond and Adamson (2022) argue that for large-scale assessments to be effective, educators must understand not only “what” to implement but also “why” the policy exists and “how” assessment data should be interpreted.

The limited conceptual understanding observed in this study suggests gaps in teacher assessment literacy—a recurring challenge in developing countries' education systems (Brookhart, 2023). Without sufficient training, teachers tend to perceive standardized tests as bureaucratic requirements rather than formative tools that can improve instructional decision-making. This can weaken the transformative potential of assessments like the TKA, which are intended to generate diagnostic information that supports Kurikulum Merdeka's competency-based learning model.

Another central finding concerns students' readiness for the TKA, which teachers perceived as moderate. This condition reflects two major aspects: psychological readiness and cognitive readiness. Psychologically, many

students experienced test-related anxiety. Although the TKA is not a high-stakes graduation requirement, students often associate standardized tests with future academic opportunities, echoing trends observed by Putwain (2020), who found that perceived test importance strongly correlates with anxiety levels. High anxiety can reduce working memory efficiency and impair performance, especially in tasks requiring inferential and analytical reasoning—core components of the TKA English section.

Cognitively, students struggled with higher-order thinking tasks, suggesting misalignment between classroom instruction and assessment demands. This issue is consistent with findings from Popham (2022), who argues that if students experience predominantly rote-based instruction, they may find it difficult to engage with assessments requiring analytical thinking, synthesis, or evaluative judgment. Although the Kurikulum Merdeka aims to promote deeper learning and critical thinking, teachers may still be transitioning away from previous curriculum models that emphasized memorization. Brookhart (2023) emphasizes that students will perform better on assessments aligned with higher-order thinking only when teachers integrate these skills into daily learning activities.

The positive attitudes expressed by most students toward the TKA provide an encouraging perspective. Teachers observed that when students understood the test's purpose and received clear, consistent feedback, they became more engaged and motivated. This finding aligns with expectancy-value theory, which posits that students' motivation increases when they perceive an assessment as useful and attainable (Wigfield & Eccles, 2020). Furthermore, Brown and Harris (2021) emphasize that students are more likely to embrace standardized assessments when teachers communicate transparently, demonstrate supportive attitudes, and provide sufficient preparation.

However, the slight indifference observed among some students indicates that not all learners fully understood the relevance of the TKA, despite school-level socialization efforts. This underscores the importance of continuous communication strategies, possibly including parental involvement, student workshops, or counseling services. UNESCO (2023) stresses that assessment literacy is not needed only by teachers but also by students, who must understand the purpose and process of assessments to engage meaningfully with them.

An important implication of these findings relates to systemic alignment. According to the OECD (2024), successful assessment reform requires coherence between curriculum, instruction, teacher training, and assessment design. In this study, while policy and procedural structures were in place, instructional and psychological support systems appeared less developed. This misalignment can undermine the reliability and validity of assessment results, as students' performance might reflect systemic barriers rather than actual academic ability.

The results also point to the importance of school-level collaboration. Effective implementation of large-scale assessments often requires coordinated efforts among teachers, school leaders, counselor teams, and curriculum developers. International studies highlight that professional learning communities—where teachers collaboratively analyze test frameworks, co-design lesson plans, and discuss student needs—significantly improve assessment readiness (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2022). Encouragingly, the participating schools demonstrated initiative through try-outs and preparatory activities, suggesting willingness at the institutional level to build stronger internal assessment cultures.

Lastly, the findings illuminate broader challenges in Indonesia's ongoing transition toward competency-based education. The TKA represents a step toward national alignment with 21st-century learning principles, yet its success depends on long-term pedagogical shifts, adequate capacity building, and consistent monitoring. This study reinforces UNESCO's (2023) recommendations that assessment reform must be iterative, participatory, and supported by continuous stakeholder engagement—especially in contexts where previous learning paradigms differ significantly from new assessment expectations.

In summary, this expanded discussion highlights that while the implementation of the TKA shows promising structural readiness and generally positive student attitudes, significant challenges remain in teachers' conceptual understanding, student cognitive preparation, and systemic alignment. Addressing these issues requires sustained professional development, strategic communication, pedagogical transformation, and comprehensive student support mechanisms. Without such efforts, standardized assessments risk becoming procedural obligations rather than meaningful instruments for improving teaching and learning outcomes in Indonesian schools.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the Academic Ability Test (*Tes Kemampuan Akademik*/TKA) under Regulation Number 045/H/AN/2025 has generally been received positively at the school level, yet it still faces substantive challenges that must be addressed to achieve its intended educational impact. From teachers' perspectives, schools have demonstrated strong procedural compliance through activities such as try-outs, indicating institutional readiness and responsiveness to policy mandates. However, variations in teachers' understanding of TKA regulations suggest that implementation often remains at a surface level, emphasizing administrative fulfillment rather than the pedagogical purpose of assessment.

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Regarding students' readiness, the findings reveal that most students are moderately prepared academically but encounter significant psychological and cognitive obstacles. Test anxiety, stress related to the perceived high stakes of TKA for university admission, and difficulties in adapting to higher-order thinking question formats limit students' ability to demonstrate their true academic competence. These challenges point to a gap between instructional practices that still emphasize rote learning and the analytical, reasoning-based skills required by the TKA, particularly in English reading comprehension.

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