

Investigating the Challenges Faced by the English Teachers in Teaching English at SMP Negeri 14 Palu

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A B S T R A C T

This study addresses research gap concerning the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in resource-constrained public schools, where empirical data on teacher adaptation remains limited. It aims to identify instructional challenges and the adaptive strategies employed by English teachers at SMP Negeri 14 Palu. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were gathered from three teachers via purposive sampling through open-ended questionnaire and document analysis. The data were analyzed through reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Findings indicate that primary obstacles include students' limited vocabulary, lack of digital media (projectors), insufficient textbooks, and low motivation linked to socio-economic factors. Teachers mitigated these issues by independently duplicating materials, utilizing smartphones as learning tools, and implementing differentiated instruction based on proficiency levels. The study concludes that teachers' creativity in modifying methods and media is essential for effective teaching in facility-deprived environments.

Keywords: *Teacher Challenges, Teaching Strategies, English Language Teaching, SMP Negeri 14 Palu*

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INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency has become a global necessity, yet teaching it in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context remains a complex task. In Indonesia, the transition to the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has introduced a paradigm shift toward student-centered and differentiated learning. However, the implementation of this curriculum in schools often faces significant hurdles. According to Sebayang et al. (2025) teachers frequently encounter difficulties in aligning curriculum expectations with students' actual English proficiency and interests. This gap suggests that while policy changes occur at a national level, the local classroom reality often remains stagnant due to various constraints.

One of the most widely reported issues is low student motivation. Many Indonesian students consider English a difficult subject due to its unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Hamied, 2012). As a result, they tend to feel anxious or embarrassed when asked to speak in front of their peers, especially in oral tasks. This phenomenon aligns with Krashen (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that emotional variables like anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation influence a learner's ability to acquire a second language. If the affective filter is high, learners are less likely to absorb or use language input effectively.

In addition, overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional time make it difficult for teachers to provide personalized feedback or implement communicative methods. A single English teacher may be responsible for 30 to 40 students per class, which limits opportunities for interaction and speaking practice (Lie, 2007). Teachers often have to resort to teacher-centered strategies, such as translation and drilling, just to meet syllabus requirements. This reduces students' chances to practice English meaningfully (Faudi et al., 2023; Sambodo et al., 2022; Ying, 2018).

Another issue is the lack of adequate teaching materials and resources. Many schools, particularly in rural areas, do not have access to language laboratories, up-to-date textbooks, or digital tools to support interactive learning. Teachers often rely on photocopies, outdated grammar exercises, or their own materials (Suryati, 2015). Even when schools provide multimedia equipment, the infrastructure (like stable electricity or internet) may not be reliable, limiting the usefulness of these tools (Pangaribuan et al., 2017; Zhu, 2025).

The diversity in student proficiency within a single class is also a concern. In junior high schools, it is common to find students with very different levels of English. Some may have had private tutoring or exposure to English in primary school, while others are complete beginners. This variation forces teachers to adapt instruction in ways that are both inclusive and effective, which can be challenging without training in differentiated instruction.

Finally, the professional burden placed on English teachers is considerable. In many schools, teachers not only manage classroom instruction but also take on administrative duties, extracurricular programs, and curriculum development (Harianingsih & Jusoh, 2022; Li & Peng, 2022; Masluha, 2023; Putri & Sari, 2020; Taufik et al., 2021). These responsibilities, combined with the emotional stress of handling reluctant learners, can lead to teacher burnout and decreased performance (Siregar & Ningsih, 2022). In summary, EFL teachers in Indonesia face multifaceted challenges that stem from student attitudes, classroom conditions, institutional limitations, and curriculum expectations. Without strong support systems, including adequate resources, professional training, and policy alignment, these issues are likely to persist and affect the quality of English language education.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to provide a detailed and systematic description of the challenges and strategies of English teachers. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This method was chosen to capture the authentic experiences of teachers in their specific instructional context at SMP Negeri 14 Palu. The subjects of this study were three English teachers at SMP Negeri 14 Palu, selected through a purposive sampling technique. The criteria for selection were based on their active involvement in teaching English under the Curriculum Merdeka framework.

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design. The aim was to explore and understand the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching English at SMPN 14 Palu based on their written reflections and instructional documents.

Instruments

Data were collected through two main instruments: an open-ended questionnaire and document analysis. The open-ended questionnaire allowed the participants to provide in-depth responses regarding the obstacles they encountered in the classroom and the specific pedagogical strategies they implemented. Meanwhile, the document analysis focused on the teachers' Modul Ajar (lesson plans) to triangulate the questionnaire data and observe how instructional planning reflects existing challenges.

Data Collection

The data in this research were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and document analysis. The questionnaire was administered to three English teachers to explore their experiences and challenges in teaching English. In addition, a teaching document in the form of a lesson plan (modul ajar) was analyzed to support and enrich the data obtained from the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the open-ended questionnaire were analyzed as the main data source, while the lesson plan was used as supporting data to clarify and strengthen the findings.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This research was conducted over four days. On the first day, the researcher delivered the research permission letter to the school. On the second day, the researcher returned to distribute the questionnaire sheets to the teachers. On the third day, the researcher came back to clarify several questions listed in the questionnaire. On the fourth day, the researcher collected the completed questionnaires from the English teachers. It should be noted that the researcher provided seven questions, which were divided into two sections. The first section focused on the challenges in teaching English, while the second section focused on strategies to overcome those challenges. These questions were designed to achieve the research objectives: first, to investigate and identify in detail the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching English, and second, to analyse and describe the strategies implemented by English teachers.

Table 1. The Result of Open-ended Questionnaire

No	Open-ended Questionnaire	Responses
1	The main challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T1 : "Lack of vocabulary." - T2 : "Students still have limited vocabulary, so teachers use Indonesian to explain the learning material. Supporting facilities and infrastructure are also inadequate, and the number of textbooks is not proportional to the number of students." - T3 : "Students still lack vocabulary."
2	The most challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T1 : "Vocabulary, because without vocabulary students cannot do anything, whether in speaking or writing." - T2 : "Students still have very limited vocabulary, and some have never learned English before. Teachers have to start from the beginning according to students' needs, which takes time because students often ask the meaning of words during the learning process. In addition, the number of dictionaries available at school is limited. Although students have mobile phones, they sometimes do not have internet data." - T3 : "The lack of students' vocabulary is the main challenge because teachers and students need to find the meaning of words together before completing the assigned tasks."
3	Motivational, language proficiency, or learning attitude challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T1 : "Students lack confidence to speak and have limited vocabulary." - T2 : "Difficulties related to learning motivation are often found among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have limited learning environments at home. This condition affects their language ability and attitudes in daily life, especially during the learning process at school." - T3 : "Students' language ability is still limited due to lack of vocabulary, and the number of supporting textbooks is also insufficient."
4	Difficulties related to teaching materials, media, facilities, or time allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T1 : "The main constraint is the limited number of infocus (projectors), so teachers have to take turns using them." - T2 : "Learning media, books, and school facilities are challenges we face. The number of books is not proportional to the number of students, the number of projectors is limited compared to the number of teachers, and other facilities are also insufficient." - T3 : "Learning media affect students' difficulties, and the limited number of projectors in the school forces teachers to use them alternately, while student textbooks are also insufficient."
5	Strategies for overcoming difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T1 : "Use mobile phones and textbooks." - T2 : "For books, we usually photocopy the materials and distribute them to students, or use a projector at certain times (based on a schedule) to make students more interested in learning, or use mobile phones. Students are allowed to use their mobile phones during the learning process."

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| 6 | Strategies for aligning instruction with students' abilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T3 : "The use of projectors is scheduled so all students can access them, mobile phones are used when needed in the learning process, and books are sometimes supplemented by photocopying the materials." - T1 : "Divide students into several groups advanced, intermediate, and lower and give tasks according to their abilities." - T2 : "To address differences in students' abilities, we divide them into several groups: advanced, intermediate, and lower. Based on these group differences, we also design different levels of material difficulty, and the types of questions are adjusted to their abilities, so that when students present their group work, all of them can perform well." - T3 : "The way we adapt learning to students with different abilities is by dividing them into three groups, and the types of questions are also provided in three levels according to the students' abilities." |
| 7 | The most effective learning activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - T1 : "Learning activities that use media make students more interested and enthusiastic in completing tasks." - T2 : "Learning activities that use instructional media such as pictures, videos, stories, and others make students more interested and active in the teaching and learning process, so they can understand the material more easily." - T3 : "Learning activities that attract students' attention are those that use instructional media. By using media, students become more active and more interested in learning, so they can understand the material more quickly." |

Discussion

The first point of discussion concerned the primary challenges identified by the teachers. The data revealed that limited vocabulary was the most fundamental obstacle in the English teaching-learning process at SMP Negeri 14 Palu. All three participants (T1, T2, and T3) highlighted that students' lack of word mastery hindered their ability to comprehend and produce the language. T2 specifically pointed out that this linguistic deficit forced teachers to frequently switch to Indonesian to explain materials, which significantly reduced the students' exposure to English.

Building upon the previous point, the second discussion focused on why vocabulary was considered the most significant challenge among all teaching obstacles. The participants emphasized that vocabulary was the "engine" of language; as T1 argued, students could not perform speaking or writing tasks without a sufficient word bank. The findings also highlighted a time management issue: T2 and T3 noted that lessons often stalled because teachers and students had to find the meanings of words together before proceeding to the actual tasks. This situation illustrated that at SMP Negeri 14 Palu, the digital divide and the lack of traditional resources created a cycle where vocabulary acquisition remained slow, making it the most persistent hurdle in the classroom.

The third point of discussion shifted toward the psychological and environmental factors affecting students' learning attitudes. The findings indicated that the students' lack of language proficiency was deeply intertwined with their lack of confidence and motivation. T1 observed that limited vocabulary directly impacted students' bravery to speak, creating a barrier of anxiety in the classroom. Consequently, the struggle at SMP Negeri 14 Palu was not merely a matter of teaching technique but also a challenge of bridging the gap created by the students' external social conditions.

The fourth point discussed the logistical and technical difficulties related to teaching media and school facilities. This scarcity forced teachers to use a rotating schedule, which disrupted the continuity of media-based lessons and limited the teachers' creativity in delivering visual materials. Furthermore, the shortage of student textbooks created another layer of difficulty. T2 and T3 pointed out that when the number of books was not proportional to the number of students, the efficiency of classroom activities was compromised. These constraints suggested that teachers were often preoccupied with managing shared resources and improvising materials, which could detract from the quality of instructional time. The lack of these essential tools indicated that the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school was still hampered by fundamental hardware shortages.

The fifth point of discussion explored the proactive strategies employed by the teachers to mitigate the lack of facilities and resources. The findings demonstrated that teachers at SMP Negeri 14 Palu did not remain passive despite the constraints; instead, they engaged in pedagogical improvisation. T2 and T3 highlighted the practice of photocopying materials to ensure that every student had access to the lesson, even when official textbooks were insufficient. These adaptive measures indicated that teachers' resourcefulness was a critical factor in maintaining the teaching-learning process, turning personal technology and manual reproduction of materials into vital educational lifelines.

The sixth point of discussion examined the teachers' pedagogical approach to addressing the diverse proficiency levels within a single classroom. The findings revealed a consistent use of differentiated instruction as a solution to students' varying language abilities. All participants (T1, T2, and T3) described a systematic method of dividing students into three distinct groups: advanced, intermediate, and lower. By adjusting the level of difficulty in questions and tasks based on the specific group's capability, teachers ensured that every student could participate meaningfully without being overwhelmed or underchallenged. This strategic grouping allowed students at the lower level to gain confidence through achievable tasks, while advanced students were pushed further.

The final aspect of the discussion centered on the specific learning activities that yielded the highest engagement and effectiveness. A strong consensus emerged among all teachers regarding the transformative power of instructional media. The data indicated that activities involving visual and audio-visual aids such as pictures, videos, and stories significantly boosted students' enthusiasm and focus. Through the integration of this media, teachers could effectively bridge the gap between difficult language concepts and student engagement, ensuring a more dynamic and effective learning atmosphere even within a limited environment.

The challenges faced by English teachers at SMP Negeri 14 Palu represented a complex interplay between linguistic, technical, and socio-economic factors. The persistent issue of limited vocabulary served as the root of most pedagogical hurdles, which was further exacerbated by the shortage of essential school facilities like textbooks and projectors. However, the findings also highlighted the resilience and adaptability of the teachers. Through creative strategies such as the integration of mobile technology, the use of differentiated instruction, and the strategic application of visual media, teachers were able to navigate these constraints. These efforts not only bridged the resource gap but also fostered a more inclusive and engaging environment for students with diverse backgrounds and abilities. Ultimately, while the obstacles were significant, the proactive pedagogical shifts made by the teachers remained the most crucial element in ensuring the continuity of English language learning in this context.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data analysis, this study concludes that English teachers at SMP Negeri 14 Palu encounter complex and interrelated instructional challenges encompassing both linguistic and managerial aspects. The primary obstacles are students' significant lack of vocabulary, which serves as a major barrier to achieving productive skills such as speaking and writing. This situation is exacerbated by external factors, namely low student motivation rooted in socio-economic backgrounds and a lack of supportive learning environments at home. Furthermore, institutional infrastructure limitations specifically the scarcity of digital media devices like projectors and an insufficient ratio of textbooks act as physical constraints that increase the teachers' workload in ensuring equal distribution of learning materials. Despite the constraints, teachers demonstrate resilience by employing creative adaptive strategies to maintain the continuity of the learning process. These include improvising materials through independent photocopying to compensate for textbook shortages and integrating students' smartphones as alternative digital tools and dictionaries. Pedagogically, teachers implement differentiated instruction by grouping students based on proficiency

levels advanced, intermediate, and lower and adjusting the complexity of instructions accordingly. The use of visual media, such as image and videos, has proven to be the most effective method for enhancing student engagement and comprehension. Ultimately, instructional effectiveness in this setting relies heavily on the teachers' ability to modify methods and media to remain relevant despite limited facilities.

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