



English Learning in the Interior of Papua: Unveiling Student Needs and Pedagogical Realities in Vocational Schools

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ABSTRACT: English language education in Indonesia's 3T (Frontier, Outermost, and Disadvantaged) regions remains critically underexamined, particularly in vocational school contexts where language proficiency carries direct implications for students' economic futures. This study investigates the characteristics of English learning currently implemented in vocational schools in the interior of Papua and examines students' needs for more effective English instruction in 3T areas. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three English teachers and five Grade X vocational students, supplemented by non-participant classroom observations and document analysis. Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2020) interactive model of data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. Findings reveal that current English instruction is shaped by ten intersecting themes, including persistent foundational skill deficits, teacher-led contextual and creative adaptations, severe resource scarcity, technology constraints with teacher-dependent access, and strategic use of local language as a pedagogical bridge. Analysis of student needs identified twelve themes, encompassing strong preferences for interactive and game-based activities, locally relevant content connected to Papuan cultural heritage, comprehensive skill development with emphasis on speaking and reading, critical access to basic learning resources, collaborative learning structures, and robust future-oriented motivation centered on career aspirations in tourism and hospitality. The findings underscore the urgent need for differentiated curriculum approaches, investment in foundational resources, infrastructure development, and culturally responsive pedagogical models tailored to the realities of remote Indonesian education.

KEYWORDS: English learning needs, vocational school, 3T areas, Papua, culturally responsive pedagogy, needs analysis

INTRODUCTION

The disparity in English language education between urban and remote areas in Indonesia constitutes one of the most pressing challenges to educational equity in the archipelago. Nowhere is this disparity more acute than in the 3T regions (Terdepan, Terluar, Tertinggal), where geographical isolation, limited infrastructure, and resource constraints create fundamentally different educational realities from those experienced by students in Java or major urban centers (Sofiaturohmah & Andi Kasman, 2025; Poedjiastutie et al., 2021). The interior of Papua, characterized by rugged terrain, restricted transportation access, and a distinct cultural and linguistic landscape, exemplifies the extreme challenges confronting English education in Indonesia's most remote regions. Understanding the specific characteristics of English instruction and students' authentic learning needs in these contexts is not merely a scholarly exercise but an urgent prerequisite for developing policies and practices capable of addressing the profound inequities characterizing Indonesian education.

Vocational high schools in Papua's interior occupy a particularly critical position in the educational landscape. These institutions bear responsibility for equipping students with both academic knowledge and practical competencies that can support employment and economic participation (Maru et al., 2021). For students in these areas, English proficiency can open pathways to opportunities in tourism, hospitality, and transportation that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Papua's distinctive cultural traditions and natural environment create particular relevance for English learning, as students who can communicate with domestic and international visitors gain meaningful advantages in the local labor market. Yet the very conditions that distinguish Papua also generate barriers to English learning that standardized, urban-oriented curricula fail to adequately address.

The challenges facing English education in Papua's interior are multidimensional and interconnected. Students frequently arrive at vocational high school without foundational English competencies, having received minimal or no substantive English instruction in prior schooling due to resource limitations and teacher shortages (Bradford, 2016; Goo et al., 2025). Teachers must simultaneously address these foundational gaps and meet grade-level curriculum demands, creating what may be described as a



building-on-weak-foundation dilemma. Schools lack basic resources including printed textbooks and adequate facilities, compelling teachers to rely on personal creativity and internet-sourced materials accessed through personal devices. Technology access is severely constrained, with many students lacking mobile phones and internet connectivity, generating a paradox in which teachers draw upon digital resources that students cannot independently access.

Despite these formidable constraints, the situation presents meaningful assets. Teachers in Papua's interior demonstrate remarkable creativity and sustained commitment, developing contextual approaches that connect English to students' daily lives and local culture (Wibawa et al., 2024; Nahwiyah & Syarif, 2025). Students express strong motivation driven by career aspirations in tourism, hospitality, and related sectors. The rich cultural heritage of Papua, encompassing traditional ceremonies, distinctive artifacts, and unique endemic fauna, provides a wealth of content available for culturally responsive English instruction. The challenge lies not in the absence of motivation or cultural relevance but in developing pedagogical models capable of operating effectively within severe resource constraints while building upon these existing assets.

Despite growing scholarly interest in remote area education, limited research has specifically examined vocational schools in Papua's interior, and fewer studies have centered students' voices in articulating their own learning needs and preferences. This gap is significant because understanding learners' perceived needs is essential for developing pedagogies that will genuinely engage them. The present study addresses this gap by investigating both current instructional characteristics and student-expressed needs, thereby providing a comprehensive foundation for contextually appropriate English learning models. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of English learning currently applied in vocational schools in the interior of Papua? (2) What are the needs of students for more effective English language learning in 3T areas?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the characteristics of English learning in vocational schools in the interior of Papua and to explore students' needs for more effective English instruction in 3T areas. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the need for contextual depth and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences, pedagogical practices, and sociocultural dynamics shaping English language education in these remote and resource-constrained environments. The case study design enabled intensive investigation of the phenomenon within its real-world context, acknowledging the inherent interconnectedness between the phenomenon and its setting (Yin, 2018; Cahapay & Labrador, 2021).

Participants and Research Context

The study was conducted in selected vocational high schools located in remote 3T regions of Papua's interior, chosen for their representativeness with respect to geographical isolation, limited access to educational facilities, minimal English exposure, and shortage of qualified teaching personnel. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015; Menser et al., 2021), with criteria including active English teachers with a minimum of one year of experience in 3T settings and Grade X vocational students representing diverse proficiency levels. A total of eight participants were involved: three English teachers and five Grade X students. The focus on Grade X is intentional, as this stage marks the entry point into vocational education where foundational English skills are introduced and are critical for subsequent academic and professional development.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. This format combined predetermined questions with the flexibility to probe emerging themes and follow participants' responses (Ruslin et al., 2022; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Teacher interviews examined current teaching methods, available resources, technology access, assessment practices, and the role of local culture. Student interviews explored preferred learning activities, perceived skill development needs, required resources, motivations, and interest in culturally connected learning. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, lasted 45 to 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Non-participant classroom observations and document analysis of lesson plans, teaching materials, and assessment records were conducted to triangulate interview findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), comprising three concurrent flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. All interviews were transcribed



verbatim and read repeatedly for familiarization. Data condensation involved systematic coding using both deductive codes derived from the research questions and inductive codes emerging from the data (Saldana, 2021; Bingham, 2023). Codes were refined and grouped into categories and themes through constant comparison. Data display involved organizing condensed data into thematic matrices presenting themes, key findings, and representative quotations. Conclusion drawing entailed interpreting patterns, returning to original data, and actively seeking disconfirming evidence to ensure analytic rigor.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing (Dado et al., 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was addressed through thick description of context and participants. An audit trail and reflexive journaling enhanced dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained, informed consent was secured from all participants with parental consent for minors, and pseudonyms

RESULTS

Report the findings in a clear and logical sequence, without interpretation. Use text, tables, and figures to present quantitative and qualitative results as appropriate. Ensure that: **Current Characteristics of English Learning**
Analysis of interview data from three English teachers revealed ten major themes regarding the current characteristics of English language learning in vocational schools in Papua's interior. These themes collectively illuminate the intersection of persistent resource constraints, teacher creativity, and the critical pedagogical role of cultural and linguistic bridging strategies. Table I presents a structured summary of these themes.

Table I. Themes in Current Characteristics of English Learning in Papua's Interior

| Theme | Key Findings |
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| Low Engagement and Foundational Deficits | Students exhibit low participation attributable to limited foundational skills. Many struggle with speaking and basic reading, and some had not yet mastered letter recognition. English is widely perceived as an inaccessible and intimidating subject. |
| Contextual and Personal Approaches | Teachers connect English instruction to students' daily lives and local culture. Student-centered and personalized methods are employed to sustain engagement, with learning built from individual interests and familiar contexts. |
| Severe Resource Limitations | No printed English textbooks are available. Teachers source materials from the internet, social media, newspapers, brochures, and product packaging. Language is simplified to match students' proficiency levels. |
| Technology Constraints | Most students do not own mobile phones. Teachers use personal devices as the primary technology source. Unstable internet connectivity makes technology-dependent activities consistently unreliable. |
| Underutilized Facilities | Basic facilities such as computer labs, libraries, and internet access exist but are rarely used for English learning due to scheduling conflicts, technical malfunctions, and signal instability. Facilities function primarily as display resources. |
| Practical Assessment Methods | Assessment is conducted through conversational speaking tasks and vocabulary recall. Teachers monitor natural progress over time rather than relying solely on formal examinations. Basic improvements such as learning to read are recognized as meaningful achievements. |
| Foundational Gaps as Core Challenge | Students arrive with minimal or no prior English knowledge. Teachers must begin from foundational literacy while simultaneously meeting curriculum |



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| | demands, requiring extraordinary patience and pedagogical flexibility. |
| Local Language as Pedagogical Bridge | Teachers use local languages to mediate English instruction. Local language is treated as a bridge: instruction delivered solely in English produces confusion, whereas bilingual explanation facilitates immediate comprehension. |
| Absence of Extracurricular Programs | No active English Club or English extracurricular activities exist. Previous attempts were discontinued due to students' post-school responsibilities, including assisting parents in agricultural and market activities. |
| Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Practice | Strengths include contextual and practical teaching approaches, close teacher-student relationships, and values-based education. Weaknesses include limited facilities, minimal English exposure outside school, few qualified teachers, and memorization-oriented instructional methods. |

Students' Needs for Effective English Learning

Analysis of interview data from five vocational students revealed twelve major themes regarding their needs for more effective English learning. These student-expressed needs provide a clear and actionable direction for pedagogical development tailored to the 3T context. Table II presents a summary of these themes.

Table II. Themes in Students' Needs for Effective English Learning in 3T Areas

| Theme | Key Findings |
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| Interactive and Game-Based Activities | Students strongly prefer team-based games, role-play, word guessing, singing, and creating promotional posters. Game-based activities reduce tension and create low-anxiety participation conditions that encourage full engagement. |
| Locally Relevant Topics | Students desire English content connected to local culture and environment, including describing noken bags, explaining the bakar batu ceremony, introducing regional food, and discussing the cendrawasih bird. |
| Comprehensive Skill Development | Students wish to improve all language skills, with particular emphasis on speaking and reading as foundational competencies. Limited reading comprehension impedes textual understanding, while limited speaking confines vocabulary to passive recognition. |
| Critical Need for Basic Resources | Students urgently require printed English textbooks, stable internet, electricity, and adequate learning facilities. Currently, learning is almost entirely dependent on board-based note-taking, which constitutes an insufficient foundation. |
| Preference for Collaborative Learning | Students prefer group work, games, and peer discussions. Studying collaboratively builds enthusiasm, confidence, and mutual support, facilitating understanding through idea exchange and peer assistance. |
| Foundational Barriers and Vocabulary Building | Limited prior English exposure creates substantial learning gaps. Students need structured vocabulary building, translation practice, and encouraged peer speaking opportunities to develop communicative courage and basic competence. |
| Strong Future-Oriented Motivation | Career aspirations powerfully motivate learning: students aspire to communicate with foreign tourists, work in hotels, become flight attendants, and join cruise ships. English is viewed as a direct gateway to economic and professional opportunity. |
| Speaking Practice | Students desire regular speaking practice through self-introduction, tour guide |



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| Opportunities | simulation, interviews, debates, and poetry reading. Structured opportunities to speak are identified as critical and currently absent elements of instruction. |
| Limited Out-of-School Access | English exposure outside school is extremely limited. The absence of mobile phones and intermittent television access due to electricity issues means learning is entirely school-dependent, placing maximum responsibility on classroom instruction. |
| Need for Multimedia Materials | Students require videos, images, audio content, games, and printed books. Videos are considered especially valuable for modeling correct pronunciation and contextual language use, but remain rarely available due to equipment shortages. |
| Time Constraints from Home Responsibilities | Students assist parents with farming and market activities after school, leaving minimal time for independent study. The absence of an English-speaking home environment further reduces motivation for out-of-school language practice. |
| Culturally Connected Learning | Students want English integrated with local cultural identity, including describing regional dances, explaining traditional instruments, sharing stories about cultural ceremonies, and promoting Papua's natural and cultural heritage to international audiences. |

Cross-Cutting Patterns

Across both teacher and student data, four cross-cutting patterns emerged. First, the centrality of foundational gaps appears in both teacher accounts of instructional challenges and student accounts of learning barriers, confirming that addressing pre-existing skill deficits is the most fundamental prerequisite for effective English instruction in this context. Second, cultural relevance is valued from both perspectives: teachers strategically deploy local language and culture as instructional bridges, while students actively desire English content connected to their cultural heritage and future aspirations. Third, the resource paradox is shared by both parties: teachers cannot provide what institutions do not have, and students cannot learn independently from materials that do not exist. Fourth, motivation remains robust despite adversity: teachers' sustained commitment and students' career aspirations demonstrate that the will to learn and teach exists and can serve as a foundation for systemic improvement.

DISCUSSION

Cumulative Educational Disadvantage and the Foundational Gap

The reality that students arrive at vocational high school without foundational English literacy reflects what may be characterized as cumulative educational disadvantage in 3T areas, where resource limitations generate cascading effects on student learning trajectories (Darto et al., 2024). As documented by Poedjiastutie et al. (2021), sociocultural challenges in remote Indonesian areas create substantial barriers to English teaching, including limited exposure, inadequate resources, and teachers who must simultaneously address foundational deficits and grade-level curriculum demands. This foundational gap illustrates the necessity for educational interventions in 3T areas to adopt a start-where-learners-are philosophy, acknowledging that teachers must simultaneously address elementary-level competencies alongside mandated grade-level content. Such a challenge exceeds individual teacher capacity and requires sustained institutional support and systemic policy attention.

Teacher Creativity and Contextual Teaching

Despite severe resource constraints, teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable creativity and adaptability, sourcing materials from the internet, adapting content from everyday objects, and using personal devices to prepare lessons. This finding resonates with the work of Hanifa et al. (2026), who documented that teachers in remote Papua serve as central figures in bridging educational disparities through contextual learning and culturally responsive strategies. The philosophy that creative teachers emerge from limitations captures the adaptive pedagogical orientation that arises when educators must innovate within



institutional constraints, intuitively applying contextual teaching principles that, according to Kovacevic and Barbir (2024), enhance learning relevance and vocational readiness in constrained school environments.

The technology situation presents a significant paradox: teachers use personal smartphones to access online materials, yet students largely lack devices and internet connectivity, creating a condition of technology-dependent teaching without technology-enabled learning. This paradox reflects the infrastructural deficiencies and access disparities described by Naing et al. (2025), where digital applications such as Kahoot, Quizizz, and Duolingo offer theoretical potential for vocabulary development but are severely constrained by unstable internet and limited digital literacy. Melayu and Gandana (2025) similarly found that despite positive attitudes toward virtual learning in Papua, persistent obstacles related to unstable connectivity and limited device access posed substantial challenges. These realities underscore that the digital divide in 3T regions cannot be resolved through technology-focused pedagogical interventions alone without prior attention to underlying infrastructure.

Student Needs: Interactive, Culturally Responsive, and Future-Oriented

The discrepancy between current instructional practices and students' expressed preferences for interactive, game-based, and culturally connected activities represents a significant finding requiring pedagogical attention. Students' preference for collaborative games, role-play, and creative projects aligns with evidence that game-based and interactive approaches significantly increase student engagement and motivation, particularly when activities are designed to be collaborative and low-anxiety (Wulandari et al., 2024; Nuralimah et al., 2025). Students' desire for locally relevant content powerfully reflects what Canagarajah (2022) describes as the appropriation of English for local purposes, whereby learners perceive English not as a foreign imposition but as a tool for expressing local identity and communicating cultural knowledge to the world.

The strong future-oriented motivation expressed by students, who view English as essential for employment in tourism, aviation, and hospitality, provides a powerful motivational foundation consistent with Dornyei's (2020) motivational self-system theory, which posits that learners are most engaged when they can envision their future selves using the target language. Yet this powerful motivational orientation coexists with severe resource limitations that threaten to undermine it. Students urgently require printed textbooks, stable internet, electricity, and adequate facilities, echoing the cumulative educational disadvantage documented by Maru et al. (2021) in remote Indonesian educational contexts.

Collaborative Learning and Sociocultural Theory

Students' strong preference for collaborative learning through group work, games, and peer discussions aligns with sociocultural theory as articulated by Lantolf and Poehner (2023) and Chen (2025), which emphasizes that learning occurs primarily through social interaction and that peer support builds confidence, enables idea exchange, and provides mutual assistance in the absence of external resources. In resource-constrained environments where access to technology and materials is severely limited, collaborative learning structures represent both a pedagogically sound and resource-appropriate strategy for maximizing learning outcomes, enabling students to leverage each other's knowledge and experience.

Local Language as Pedagogical Bridge

The strategic use of local languages as a bridge for English instruction validates students' linguistic identities while facilitating access to the target language, positioning local language as a pedagogical ally rather than an impediment. This approach is consistent with research by Benson (2021) and Igarashi et al. (2024) on mother tongue-based education, which demonstrates that strong foundations in the first language facilitate rather than hinder second language acquisition. In the Papuan context, where dozens of local languages are spoken daily, this finding carries significant implications for teacher training and curriculum development: teachers should be equipped with strategies for leveraging students' existing linguistic resources rather than suppressing them. Combining this linguistic bridging with students' expressed desire for culturally connected content suggests that the most effective English instruction in Papua will be deeply rooted in local identity while building capacity for global communication.

Multimedia Learning and Time Constraints

Students' expressed need for multimedia learning materials aligns with the cognitive theory of multimedia learning advanced by Mayer (2021) and Candido and Cattaneo (2025), which demonstrates that combining visual and auditory information reduces cognitive load and enhances comprehension, particularly for learners with limited prior exposure to the target language. The time constraints students face due to home responsibilities reflect the reality that in rural Papua, education must compete directly with



economic survival, a factor that Musthoha et al. (2024) argue must be incorporated into the design of educational interventions for remote communities. This reality reinforces the imperative that school-based instruction must be maximally efficient and effective, as limited classroom time frequently constitutes students' sole English exposure. As Ushioda (2023) argues, language learning is most powerful when personally meaningful and identity-affirming, and students in Papua who view English as a pathway to sharing their cultural heritage and achieving their professional aspirations possess precisely this motivational orientation. What remains is the institutional responsibility to create conditions that allow this motivation to flourish.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the characteristics of English learning currently applied in vocational schools in the interior of Papua and explored students' needs for more effective English language learning in 3T areas. The findings document that current English instruction is shaped by ten intersecting themes, including low student engagement driven by foundational skill deficits, teacher creativity in adapting to resource constraints, severe scarcity of learning materials, technology constraints with teacher-dependent access, and the strategic use of local language as a pedagogical bridge. These themes collectively describe an educational environment in which committed teachers operate within systemic limitations that no individual effort alone can adequately overcome.

Students express twelve clear needs for more effective English learning, encompassing interactive and game-based activities, locally relevant topics connected to Papuan culture, comprehensive skill development with emphasis on speaking and reading, critical access to basic resources, collaborative learning structures, and culturally connected content that affirms local identity while building English proficiency. These student-expressed needs provide a concrete and actionable foundation for curriculum and pedagogical development appropriate to the 3T context.

The gap between current realities and student needs is substantial but not insurmountable. Students' strong future-oriented motivation, teachers' demonstrated creativity and commitment, and Papua's rich local culture constitute significant assets that can form the foundation of adaptive learning models designed for 3T contexts. Addressing this gap requires differentiated curriculum approaches, sustained investment in foundational resources, infrastructure development, teacher professional support, and the creation of culturally responsive learning materials that validate local identity while building global communicative competence. Future research should develop and empirically test adaptive learning models grounded in the needs identified in this study, conduct extended classroom observations to complement interview data, and explore community-based strategies for extending English learning beyond the formal classroom setting.

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