

BEYOND THE LESSON PLAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CLASSROOM AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES IN INDONESIAN EFL TEACHING

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ABSTRAK

English teachers in foreign-language settings work at the intersection of learner needs and institutional demands. This qualitative descriptive study examined the challenges experienced by English teachers at SMAN 2 Banda Aceh, the conditions they associated with those challenges, and the strategies they used in response. Three teachers, identified as R1-R3, participated. Semi-structured interviews constituted the principal data source, supported by classroom observations and lesson-plan analysis. A question-oriented, semantic thematic analysis compared patterns across participants and sources. Six themes were identified. All three teachers reported low student motivation, limited self-confidence, and insufficient vocabulary. Individual participants also emphasized reduced instructional time, repeated curriculum adjustment, and a heavy workload. Contributing conditions included perceptions of English as difficult, fear of pronunciation errors, limited use of English beyond the classroom, weak vocabulary recycling, and mood or adjustment concerns among some boarding students. Teachers responded through individual motivational conversations, short games, supportive prompting, praise for effort, low-stakes speaking and presentation opportunities, vocabulary memorization and reuse, and independent projects followed by classroom review. The themes formed an interdependent system: restricted vocabulary reduced confidence, low confidence constrained participation, and limited exposure weakened retention and motivation. The findings indicate practical teacher agency but also show that curriculum and workload pressures require school-level support. Because the study involved three teachers in one school and relied substantially on reported experience, its contribution is analytic and context-specific rather than statistically generalizable.

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INTRODUCTION

English functions across international education, employment, science, technology, and intercultural communication. Its global role gives English language education strategic importance while requiring teachers to prepare learners for communication across diverse

linguistic and cultural settings. In Indonesia, English is learned primarily as a foreign language; for many students, classroom instruction therefore provides the most regular opportunity to hear, read, write, and speak the language. Indonesian EFL teachers must consequently translate broad curricular expectations into learning opportunities that are feasible in highly localized school conditions (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019).

The teacher's role in this context extends beyond explaining linguistic forms. Teachers select accessible input, differentiate support, encourage participation, and establish a climate in which students can take linguistic risks. Engagement is behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social rather than a simple measure of compliance (Hiver et al., 2024). Teacher practices and teacher-student relationships can also shape motivation and language learning self-efficacy (Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). A teaching challenge is therefore understood here as a condition that restricts the alignment of instructional goals, teacher action, and meaningful learner participation.

Research in Indonesian EFL settings locates instructional difficulty at multiple, interacting levels. Studies have reported limited language comprehension, low motivation, uneven environmental support, restricted materials, and time constraints (Agung, 2019; Harlina & Yusuf, 2020). Research with Indonesian secondary EFL teachers additionally identifies professional-development needs, uneven institutional support, and limits on teachers' participation in curricular decision-making (Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Girocki & Farrell, 2019). These findings suggest that classroom problems cannot be attributed solely to learner effort or teacher technique.

Learner-related challenges are often mutually reinforcing. Students with limited vocabulary may struggle to formulate sentences, increasing fear of error and reducing their readiness to speak. Less participation then means fewer opportunities to retrieve and consolidate language. Meta-analytic evidence links second-language anxiety with lower achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019) and identifies communicative confidence as a robust correlate of willingness to communicate (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019). Confidence, vocabulary, participation, and achievement should therefore be interpreted as connected processes rather than isolated learner traits.

Motivation likewise depends on more than momentary enjoyment. It is shaped by learners' possible language selves, prior success, perceived task value, social relationships, and the quality of classroom experience (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Recent classroom research further indicates that motivational teaching practice can make a substantial contribution to language-learning self-efficacy while still interacting with

individual learner differences (Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023). In Indonesia, low interest and limited family or environmental support have also been linked to English-learning difficulty (Harlina & Yusuf, 2020).

Institutional conditions shape the options available to teachers. Limited instructional time forces choices between content coverage, guided practice, and individualized feedback. Curriculum reform requires teachers to reinterpret objectives, assessment, materials, and lesson procedures, while administrative duties compete with preparation and student support. Studies of Indonesian secondary education emphasize the importance of teacher autonomy and school support during curriculum implementation (Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Rohmah et al., 2024). More broadly, sustained stress and burnout matter because teacher well-being is associated with the quality of professional functioning and with student outcomes (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

The present study was conducted at SMAN 2 Banda Aceh, an urban senior high school serving students in regular and boarding programs. This setting is analytically important because English-teaching challenges are not confined to remote or poorly resourced schools. Differences in students' interests, language histories, living arrangements, and opportunities for out-of-class English use can produce substantial variation within one institution. Examining teachers' accounts at school level complements broader Indonesian research on autonomy, professional learning, and curriculum support (Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Girocki & Farrell, 2019; Rohmah et al., 2024).

Accordingly, the study addressed three questions: (1) What challenges did English teachers encounter at SMAN 2 Banda Aceh? (2) What conditions did they associate with those challenges? and (3) What strategies did they use in response? By relating challenges to their contributing conditions and teacher responses, the study offers a situated explanation of how learner and institutional pressures interact, rather than a decontextualized list of teaching problems.

METHOD

Research Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive design to examine teachers' experiences in their natural school context. This design was selected because the research questions required a practice-near account of what teachers experienced, how they explained those experiences, and what they did in response. The analysis remained primarily descriptive and semantic: it focused on meanings explicitly communicated by participants while

recognizing that themes are analytic constructions rather than facts that simply emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Participants and Setting

The participants were three English teachers at SMAN 2 Banda Aceh. The school operates regular and boarding programs, giving the participants experience with students whose daily routines and opportunities for English exposure varied. To protect confidentiality and enable systematic comparison, the teachers were identified as R1, R2, and R3. Their accounts were treated as context-specific professional perspectives, not as estimates of how frequently the same challenges occur across Indonesian schools.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were the principal data source. The interview guide prompted teachers to describe the challenges they faced, the conditions they associated with each challenge, the effects they observed, and the strategies they used. Open follow-up questions elicited concrete examples. Classroom observations and lesson-plan analysis served as supporting sources for comparing reported experience with teaching activity and documented planning. Quotations were lightly edited for grammatical clarity without altering their intended meaning.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The accounts were analyzed through a question-oriented thematic procedure. First, interview material was read repeatedly for familiarization. Second, meaningful segments were coded according to the challenge, contributing condition, classroom consequence, or response described. Third, related codes were clustered into candidate themes and compared across R1–R3. Fourth, theme boundaries and labels were reviewed against the interview accounts, observation notes, and lesson-plan evidence. Finally, representative quotations and cross-participant counts were selected to make the analytic basis visible. This recursive movement from data to codes, themes, review, and reporting is consistent with contemporary guidance for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Analytic Scope and Reporting Boundaries

Cross-participant counts were used only to indicate whether a theme appeared in

one, two, or all three accounts. Given the small, context-bound sample, counts were not interpreted as prevalence estimates. Source comparison was used to examine coherence among interview, observation, and lesson-plan evidence; it was not treated as statistical validation. The analysis therefore prioritized contextual depth, transparency, and correspondence with the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The analysis produced six themes. Three learner-related challenges—low motivation, limited self-confidence, and insufficient vocabulary—were reported by all participants. Three institutional challenges—limited instructional time, curriculum change, and workload—were each emphasized by one participant. The counts in Table 1 show how widely a theme appeared in the three interviews; they should not be interpreted as prevalence estimates beyond this case.

Table 1. Challenges Reported Across the Teacher Interviews

Level	Challenge	n	Reported classroom effect
Learner	Low motivation	3/3	Inattention, reluctance, and additional time needed to re-engage students
Learner	Limited self-confidence	3/3	Avoidance of speaking, reading, writing, and presenting in English
Learner	Insufficient vocabulary	3/3	Difficulty producing sentences and completing language tasks
System	Limited instructional time	1/3	Less time for explanation, guided practice, and individual support
System	Curriculum change	1/3	Repeated adjustment of plans, materials, and expectations
System	Teacher workload	1/3	Competing administrative and student-support responsibilities

Learner Motivation

All three teachers identified motivation as a recurring challenge, but they did not describe every student as unmotivated. R1 emphasized variation among students and noted that some boarding students arrived tired, unwell, or emotionally unsettled. R2 and R3 linked low motivation to the belief that English was difficult and to the limited use of English in students' environment. The challenge was therefore not merely a lack of effort; it reflected perceived difficulty, mood, prior experience, and the relevance of English outside class.

R2: "The biggest challenge I face right now is students' lack of motivation in the learning process."

Teachers responded in two complementary ways. R1 used break time or other available moments to speak individually with students who needed attention and to understand the problems affecting their participation. R2 and R3 inserted short games into lessons to reduce boredom and restore attention. These strategies combined relational support with a change in classroom activity, although neither response by itself addressed the broader scarcity of English exposure.

Self-Confidence and Participation

R1-R3 also reported that many students lacked confidence when speaking, reading, writing, or presenting in English. They associated this pattern with limited daily practice, anxiety about pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient vocabulary. Confidence was consequently tied to both linguistic resources and classroom relationships. A student who expected correction to be embarrassing was less likely to participate, while reduced participation limited the practice needed to become more confident.

R3: "Their confidence in using English is still limited, although some students show good confidence."

The teachers used gradual participation and positive feedback. R1 invited students to read and speak in front of the class while recognizing their effort. R2 emphasized patient support and avoided putting students in a position where they felt cornered. R3 assigned presentations so that students had repeated reasons to use English publicly. Together, these responses suggest an attempt to make performance demanding enough to promote growth but sufficiently supportive to reduce the social cost of error.

Vocabulary as a Cross-Skill Constraint

Limited vocabulary was the third theme shared by all participants. The teachers observed substantial differences among students: some had strong English ability, whereas others knew mainly basic words and struggled to construct sentences. R3 connected limited vocabulary with difficulties in speaking, listening, and writing. The teachers attributed vocabulary loss to low interest, limited memorization, and especially infrequent reuse. Words learned in one meeting were easily forgotten when they were not retrieved in later tasks or daily communication.

R1: "Some students have limited vocabulary and cannot create sentences by themselves."

All three teachers assigned vocabulary learning, commonly five to ten words after a lesson, and expected students to report or use the words in a later meeting. They also encouraged spoken use. Memorization provided a manageable target, but the teachers' own explanations indicate that retention depended on application. Vocabulary work is therefore likely to be stronger when the selected words reappear in speaking, reading, and writing rather than being checked only as isolated items.

Institutional Pressures

The institutional themes were less widely shared but still important. R1 reported that the weekly allocation for English had fallen from four hours to two, leaving less time to explain material and support students. The response was to assign projects or independent study at home or in the dormitory and review the work in the next meeting. This strategy extended learning beyond the timetable, but it also depended on students' capacity to study independently.

One teacher identified recurring curriculum change as a challenge because teachers and students had to adjust to new expectations. R3 additionally described a heavy workload involving tasks beyond classroom instruction. The responses to these pressures were largely adaptive: teachers complied with policy requirements, revised their work, and continued teaching. Unlike games, encouragement, or vocabulary practice, these responses did not change the source of the challenge, illustrating the limits of individual teacher agency when a problem is structural.

Table 2. Contributing Conditions and Teacher Responses

Challenge	Contributing conditions	Teacher responses
Low motivation	English perceived as difficult; limited environmental use; mood or boarding adjustment	Individual conversations, motivational support, and short games
Low self-confidence	Fear of error, pronunciation concerns, little practice, and limited vocabulary	Praise, supportive prompting, reading aloud, speaking, and presentations
Limited vocabulary	Low interest, weak memorization, and infrequent reuse	Five-to-ten-word targets, review, and use in spoken tasks
Limited time	Two-hour weekly allocation reported under curriculum implementation	Independent projects or study followed by classroom review
Curriculum and workload	Policy changes and responsibilities beyond direct instruction	Adaptive planning, prioritization, and compliance with requirements

Discussion

The findings show that teacher challenges were interconnected rather than independent. Limited vocabulary constrained sentence production; difficulty producing language weakened confidence; low confidence reduced participation; and limited participation restricted opportunities to retrieve language or experience success. This pattern is consistent with evidence that language anxiety is negatively associated with achievement and that communicative confidence is closely related to willingness to communicate (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Teimouri et al., 2019). It also illustrates why engagement should be analyzed as a multidimensional process rather than visible participation alone (Hiver et al., 2024).

The learner-related themes align with research from other Indonesian EFL settings. Agung (2019) identified low comprehension and weak contextual support, while Harlina and Yusuf (2020) emphasized low interest and limited family or environmental support. At the professional and institutional levels, Indonesian secondary teachers have also reported development needs, limited involvement in curriculum decisions, and expectations for stronger school support (Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). The present case extends this literature by showing how teachers connected learner difficulty, affect, participation, exposure, time, and institutional demands within one school.

The teachers' strategies were pragmatic and closely tied to immediate classroom needs. Individual conversations addressed emotional or motivational concerns; supportive feedback reduced the interpersonal cost of error; presentations created purposeful reasons to speak; and short games reset attention. These responses are consistent with evidence that classroom affect, teacher-student relationships, and motivational practice shape L2 enjoyment, motivation, and self-efficacy (Dewaele et al., 2018; Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Meta-analytic evidence also suggests that gamified learning can support cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes when game elements are aligned with learning goals (Sailer & Homner, 2020). Thus, a game is pedagogically stronger when it recycles target language and elicits low-stakes participation rather than functioning only as entertainment.

Vocabulary memorization likewise needs to be treated as one component of a larger learning cycle. The teachers themselves observed that words were forgotten when students rarely retrieved or used them. A meta-analysis of intentional vocabulary-learning activities confirms that deliberate word study can be effective, although outcomes vary with task and learning conditions (Webb et al., 2020). Reviews of digital game-based vocabulary learning

likewise emphasize meaningful interaction, feedback, and sustained engagement rather than novelty alone (Zou et al., 2021). The reported five-to-ten-word routine could therefore be strengthened by selecting high-value words, spacing retrieval across meetings, and reusing the words in short oral and written tasks.

The boarding-school context introduces an additional interpretive layer. R1's account suggests that mood, health, comfort, and adjustment affected some students' readiness to learn in the morning. This observation should not be generalized to boarding students as a group. Instead, it indicates that visible disengagement may be produced by circumstances beyond the immediate lesson. Individual conversations were therefore meaningful because they treated disengagement as information requiring inquiry rather than as evidence of fixed ability or poor character.

Institutional challenges require responses beyond individual teacher creativity. A reduced timetable constrains practice and feedback, curriculum change increases planning demands, and workload competes with instructional attention. Indonesian studies show that teachers value pedagogical autonomy but expect stronger inclusion in curriculum decisions and more systematic school support (Cirocki & Anam, 2024; Rohmah et al., 2024). This support is not peripheral: sustained stress can weaken teacher well-being, and burnout has been associated with poorer student achievement and motivation (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Independent assignments may extend learning time, but schools must ensure that such work is manageable, supported, and reviewed.

The findings should be read within clear methodological boundaries. The sample included only three teachers from one school, and the evidence relied substantially on self-report. Observation and lesson-plan data enabled source comparison but were not reported in sufficient detail to establish the frequency of each challenge or the fidelity of each strategy. The available record also did not specify interview duration, the number and duration of observations, or independent-coder procedures. The study therefore provides an analytically transparent account of teacher experience, not a prevalence survey, a saturation claim, or an evaluation of strategy effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

English teachers at SMAN 2 Banda Aceh described six challenges operating across classroom and institutional levels. Low motivation, limited self-confidence, and insufficient vocabulary appeared in all three accounts, whereas limited instructional time, curriculum change, and workload were emphasized by individual participants. The analysis indicates

a connected system: restricted vocabulary made language production difficult, fear of error constrained participation, limited exposure weakened retention, and restricted time reduced opportunities for guided practice and individual support.

The teachers responded with individual encouragement, short games, supportive feedback, presentations, vocabulary targets, and independent projects. These strategies demonstrate practical agency and can be strengthened through coherent routines—for example, recycling selected vocabulary through low-stakes games, short speaking tasks, feedback, and spaced review. Individual strategies, however, cannot fully resolve curriculum and workload pressures. School leaders should protect planning time, coordinate learner support, and provide shared resources and professional learning. The conclusions remain specific to three teachers in one school and are intended to support contextual reflection rather than broad generalization.

Recommendations

1. Teachers should integrate motivation, vocabulary, and confidence-building within the same lesson routines.
2. Target vocabulary should be contextualized and recycled through reading, games, speaking, writing, and later retrieval.
3. Schools should protect planning time and provide safe participation, student-support coordination, and shared teaching resources.
4. Further studies should involve more schools, student perspectives, systematic observations, and evidence of strategy effectiveness.

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