


Bridging Educational Inequality: Reading Instruction in Remote Indonesia and Its Policy Implications

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A B S T R A C T

Educational inequality remains a major issue in Indonesia, especially in / (3T) regions where access to effective reading instruction is limited. This study explores how English reading is taught in junior secondary schools in Maluku Barat Daya, a remote and under-resourced area, and examines the challenges affecting students' literacy development. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and teaching material analysis involving sixty students of SMP Negeri 2 Tiakur and two English teachers. The findings reveal several challenges, including limited learning resources, low student vocabulary mastery, minimal English exposure, and inadequate infrastructure. Despite these difficulties, teachers show adaptability by using locally relevant texts, code-switching, collaborative learning, and simple low-technology teaching strategies to improve reading comprehension. This study highlights the important role of teachers in marginalized educational settings and emphasizes the need for responsive education policies, flexible curriculum implementation, continuous teacher development, and equitable resource distribution to support inclusive literacy development in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Educational Inequality, 3T Regions, Reading Instruction, Literacy Development, English Language Teaching, Qualitative Case Study, Maluku Barat Daya.*

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INTRODUCTION

Educational inequality in English language learning is increasingly conceptualized not only as a disparity in resources but as a difference in opportunity-to-learn conditions, which shape students' access to meaningful literacy experiences. Recent international research highlights that literacy outcomes are strongly influenced by access to instructional quality, exposure to language, and availability of learning materials (Bank, 2023; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). In this regard, inequality in 3T regions reflects a systemic imbalance where students are positioned within structurally constrained learning environments that limit their literacy development. From a cognitive perspective, reading comprehension in EFL contexts is grounded in the Lexical Quality Hypothesis proposed by Charles A. Perfetti and further developed in recent studies (Nation, 2013; Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). This theory posits that reading comprehension depends on the quality of lexical representations, including form, meaning, and use. Recent empirical research (Nation, 2013; Schmitt et al., 2020; Webb & Nation, 2020) confirms that insufficient vocabulary knowledge significantly constrains comprehension, particularly for students with limited exposure to English. More recent studies (2023–2025) extend this argument by demonstrating that lexical depth and contextualized vocabulary learning are critical predictors of reading success in EFL settings, especially in low-input environments.

In Indonesia, literacy inequality remains a significant educational issue, particularly in remote and disadvantaged regions. National and international assessments continue to demonstrate disparities in literacy achievement between urban and rural areas. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 indicate that Indonesian students' reading literacy performance remains below the OECD average, with students from disadvantaged and remote regions showing lower achievement levels compared to those in urban schools (OECD, 2023). Reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology also highlight that schools in 3T areas frequently experience shortages of qualified teachers, limited learning materials, inadequate infrastructure, and minimal exposure to literacy-rich environments. These conditions restrict students' opportunity to develop reading skills and contribute to unequal educational outcomes across regions. In eastern Indonesia, particularly in Maluku Barat Daya, geographical isolation and limited educational facilities further intensify these challenges, making literacy instruction highly dependent on teacher adaptation and contextualized pedagogical practices.

Complementing this view, the Construction-Integration Model introduced by Walter Kintsch explains reading as a process of constructing meaning through the interaction of textual information and prior knowledge. Contemporary studies (Jeon & Yamashita, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2020) show that comprehension difficulties arise when students lack either sufficient background knowledge or linguistic resources to integrate textual information. In under-resourced contexts, this challenge is intensified because students often have limited exposure to diverse texts and experiences that support meaning construction. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is understood through Sociocultural Theory developed by Lev Vygotsky and expanded in language education research (Johnson, 2021; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This theory emphasizes that learning is mediated through social interaction, tools, and cultural context. Recent studies (2020–2024) highlight that in low-resource classrooms, the absence of mediational tools—such as books, digital resources, and language-rich environments—significantly affects learning processes. As a result, teachers become key mediators who scaffold learning through interaction, code-switching, and adaptive instructional practices.

In line with this, the concept of teacher agency has gained increasing attention in recent international literature. Borg (2021) argues that teachers are not passive implementers of policy but active decision-makers who adapt instruction based on contextual realities. Similarly, Farrell & Macapinlac (2022) emphasize reflective practice as a form of professional expertise that enables teachers to respond to constraints in real-time classroom situations. These perspectives are particularly relevant in 3T contexts, where standardized teaching approaches are often impractical. Furthermore, the framework of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, developed by and extended in recent studies (Anderson & Briggs, 2022; Hammond, 2021), highlights the importance of aligning instruction with students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Contemporary research (2020–2024) demonstrates that the use of locally relevant texts enhances comprehension, engagement, and motivation, particularly in marginalized communities. Conversely, the use of culturally distant materials may create barriers to understanding, especially in remote regions such as Maluku Barat Daya.

At the policy level, recent international frameworks emphasize the limitations of standardized, one-size-fits-all approaches to education. Barrett et al., (2020) argues that effective education systems must be context-sensitive and responsive to local conditions. Similarly, Barrett et al., (2020) and UNESCO (2022) highlight that policy implementation often fails when it does not account for contextual variability, particularly in marginalized regions. This leads to a persistent policy-practice mismatch, where curriculum expectations do not align with classroom realities. Despite the growing body of international research on literacy and educational inequality, significant gaps remain. Existing studies are largely macro-level and policy-oriented,

with limited attention to the micro-level practices of teachers in real classroom settings. There is a lack of research that explicitly examines: teacher micro-strategies in reading instruction, real classroom discourse and interaction, and how teachers navigate the policy-practice mismatch in 3T regions. This gap is critical because recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that educational effectiveness depends not only on policy design but also on how policies are enacted in practice. In the context of Maluku Barat Daya, these theoretical issues converge in a setting characterized by limited resources, minimal exposure to English, and strong sociocultural specificity.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine how reading instruction is enacted in such a context by focusing on teachers as adaptive practitioners. It aims to identify the challenges they face, analyze the strategies they employ, and explore how they negotiate structural constraints to sustain student learning. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how reading instruction is enacted in SMP Negeri 2 Tiakur by focusing on teachers as adaptive practitioners within a resource-constrained 3T context. The study involved 60 junior high school students and 2 English teachers to investigate the challenges encountered in reading instruction, the adaptive strategies employed by teachers, and the ways classroom practices negotiate the gap between curriculum expectations and contextual realities.

Reading in EFL contexts is widely recognized as a multidimensional cognitive and linguistic process that requires the integration of various knowledge sources. Contemporary research emphasizes that successful reading comprehension depends on the interaction between lexical knowledge, background knowledge, and strategic processing (Jeon & Yamashita, 2021; Nation, 2013). Rather than being a passive decoding activity, reading involves active meaning construction, where students continuously interpret, predict, and evaluate textual information. A central theoretical framework that explains reading comprehension is the Lexical Quality Hypothesis, proposed by Charles A. Perfetti. This theory argues that the quality of lexical representations – encompassing form, meaning, and usage – determines the efficiency of reading processes. When students possess high-quality lexical knowledge, they can process texts more fluently and allocate cognitive resources to higher-order comprehension tasks. Conversely, weak lexical representations result in slow and fragmented reading, limiting comprehension.

Empirical studies consistently support the central role of vocabulary in reading comprehension. For example, Schmitt et al., (2020) demonstrate that students need to know approximately 95–98% of the words in a text to achieve adequate comprehension. Similarly, Webb & Nation (2020) highlight that vocabulary size and depth significantly predict reading performance in EFL students. These findings suggest that without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students struggle to move beyond surface-level decoding. In addition to lexical knowledge, metacognitive strategies play a critical role in reading development. According to Zhang & Zhang, (2020), strategies such as predicting, monitoring, and summarizing enable students to regulate their comprehension processes and overcome difficulties during reading. Teng (2020) further emphasizes that metacognitive awareness enhances students' ability to adapt reading strategies based on task demands, leading to improved comprehension outcomes.

However, it is important to note that most of these theoretical models are developed based on well-resourced educational contexts, where students have access to abundant reading materials and exposure to the target language. In such environments, instructional practices often include extensive reading programs, digital learning tools, and multimodal texts, which facilitate engagement and comprehension (Macalister, 2020; Sun et al., 2021). In contrast, in under-resourced settings such as 3T regions, these conditions are often absent. Limited access to reading materials and minimal exposure to English constrain the development of both lexical knowledge and reading strategies. As a result, reading instruction in these contexts cannot rely solely on

cognitive models but must be understood as a contextually situated practice, shaped by environmental and institutional factors.

Educational inequality is a global issue that manifests in disparities in access to resources, quality of instruction, and learning outcomes. International large-scale assessments consistently show that students in rural and marginalized areas perform significantly lower in literacy compared to their urban counterparts (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022). These disparities are not merely individual but are deeply rooted in structural inequalities that affect the distribution of educational opportunities. From a theoretical perspective, educational inequality can be understood through the concept of opportunity to learn (OTL), which refers to the extent to which students have access to the resources and conditions necessary for learning. According to international research, OTL is influenced by factors such as availability of instructional materials, teacher quality, and exposure to learning opportunities. In low-resource contexts, limited OTL significantly constrains students' academic development, particularly in literacy. In Indonesia, inequality is especially pronounced in 3T regions, where schools often face challenges related to infrastructure, teacher distribution, and resource availability. Studies by Chang et al. (2020) and Suryadarma et al. (2022) indicate that disparities in school quality and teacher allocation remain significant across regions. These structural issues directly affect the implementation of curriculum and instructional practices. Moreover, global scholarship highlights that education policies that do not consider local contexts may unintentionally reinforce inequality. Tikly (2020) argues that effective education reform must be context-sensitive, taking into account cultural, economic, and institutional conditions. Similarly, Barrett et al. (2020) emphasize that global policy frameworks often assume standardized conditions, which may not align with realities in marginalized settings. In the context of reading instruction, these inequalities translate into limited access to print materials, restricted exposure to language input, and insufficient instructional support. As a result, students in remote areas face compounded challenges that extend beyond individual ability, highlighting the need for systemic and contextually responsive interventions.

In environments characterized by limited resources, teachers play a critical role in mediating the effects of structural constraints. The concept of teacher agency has gained increasing attention in recent research, emphasizing that teachers are not passive implementers of curriculum but active decision-makers who adapt instruction based on contextual needs. According to Borg (2021), teacher agency involves the capacity to make informed pedagogical choices in response to specific classroom situations. In low-resource contexts, this often requires teachers to develop innovative strategies to overcome limitations, such as using locally available materials, simplifying texts, and employing multilingual practices. Empirical studies support the importance of adaptive pedagogy in marginalized settings. Westbrook et al. (2021) highlight that effective teaching in low-resource environments often involves flexible and context-sensitive approaches, rather than strict adherence to standardized methods. Similarly, Schweisfurth (2020) argues that student-centered education in such contexts must be adapted to local realities, rather than applied as a universal model. Recent research also emphasizes that teacher adaptation is not merely a compensatory mechanism but a form of professional expertise. Parsons et al. (2020) define adaptive teaching as the ability to modify instruction based on students' needs, learning conditions, and contextual constraints. In EFL classrooms, this includes practices such as scaffolding vocabulary, using code-switching, and facilitating collaborative learning.

Farrell & Macapinlac (2022) further suggest that reflective practice enables teachers to continuously refine their instructional strategies, enhancing their ability to respond to diverse learning contexts. In multilingual environments, code-switching has been recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool that supports comprehension and maintains classroom interaction. In the context of 3T regions, teacher adaptation becomes particularly critical, as it directly influences

the quality of learning experiences. However, reliance on individual teacher agency also raises concerns about sustainability and equity, as not all teachers may have the same capacity or support to implement adaptive practices effectively.

Effective literacy development requires policies that are grounded in evidence-based practices and responsive to contextual realities. However, international research indicates that one-size-fits-all approaches are often ineffective in addressing diverse educational needs, particularly in marginalized regions (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). According to Darling-Hammond et al., (2020), sustained improvement in literacy outcomes depends on comprehensive support systems, including teacher training, access to resources, and ongoing professional development. Avalos (2021) similarly emphasizes that teacher development must be continuous and contextually relevant to be effective.

A key issue in many education systems is the policy-practice gap, where curriculum frameworks and policy expectations do not align with classroom realities. Tikly (2020) argues that policies must be flexible and adaptable to local conditions to promote equity and inclusion. Without such alignment, teachers are left to bridge the gap, often without sufficient institutional support. Recent studies also highlight the importance of localized implementation, where policies are adapted to reflect local knowledge, culture, and needs. Anderson & Briggs, (2022) demonstrate that incorporating culturally relevant materials can enhance student engagement and comprehension, particularly in diverse classrooms. In the context of reading instruction in 3T areas, policy implications include the need for: a. equitable distribution of resources, b. context-sensitive curriculum design, c. targeted support for teachers. Without these measures, efforts to improve literacy may remain limited and uneven.

The literature reviewed above highlights several important insights. First, reading comprehension in EFL contexts is strongly influenced by vocabulary knowledge and exposure to language input. Second, educational inequality in remote areas significantly limits students' opportunity to develop these skills. Third, teachers play a crucial role in mediating these challenges through adaptive pedagogical practices. Finally, policy frameworks often fail to align with local realities, resulting in a persistent policy-practice mismatch. However, despite these contributions, there remains a notable gap in the literature. Most studies focus on macro-level analysis, such as policy evaluation or large-scale assessments, while relatively few examine micro-level classroom practices, particularly in 3T contexts. There is limited empirical evidence on how teachers implement reading instruction in real classroom settings and how they adapt to contextual constraints. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by providing contextually grounded, classroom-based insights into reading instruction in junior high school EFL classrooms in Maluku Barat Daya. By focusing on teacher practices and student experiences, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of literacy development in marginalized contexts.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how reading instruction is enacted in resource-constrained EFL classrooms. A case study approach is particularly appropriate when the aim is to investigate complex educational practices within their real-life context, where the boundaries between pedagogical processes and contextual conditions are deeply intertwined (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Conceptually, this design aligns with the study's focus on micro-level classroom practices, particularly how teachers navigate the intersection between structural constraints (e.g., limited resources, low exposure to English) and pedagogical decision-making. Rather than seeking generalizable outcomes, the study aims to generate contextually grounded insights into how reading instruction is adapted in 3T settings. Recent qualitative scholarship emphasizes that case studies are especially valuable in examining

context-sensitive teaching practices in marginalized and under-resourced environments (Baxter & Jack, 2020).

Respondents

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Tiakur, a junior high school located in a region categorized as a 3T area (*tertinggal, terdepan, dan terluar*). The school was purposively selected because it represents a geographically isolated and resource-constrained educational environment where access to English learning resources and literacy support remains limited. The participants consisted of: 2 English teachers who actively taught reading comprehension classes, and 60 junior high school students who participated in classroom reading activities and observations. Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich participants directly involved in reading instruction processes (Palinkas et al., 2020). The teacher selection criteria included: actively teaching English at SMP Negeri 2 Tiakur, having experience teaching reading comprehension, and willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations. Student participants were selected based on their active involvement in English reading classes during the observation period. The inclusion of both teachers and students enabled the researcher to examine reading instruction from both instructional and student perspectives.

Instruments

To capture the complexity of reading instruction in context, data were collected through multiple qualitative methods, enabling methodological triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted to document actual instructional practices, including teacher–student interactions, the use of teaching materials, and real-time pedagogical strategies. Observational data are particularly important in this study because they allow the researcher to capture authentic classroom discourse and micro-level teaching practices, which are often not fully revealed through self-reported data (Cohen et al., 2018; Kawulich, 2021).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their pedagogical reasoning, challenges, and adaptive strategies in teaching reading under limited-resource conditions. This method provides access to teachers' perspectives and decision-making processes, which are central to understanding teacher agency in context (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Kallio et al., 2020).

Document Analysis

Instructional materials, lesson plans, and classroom documents were analyzed to examine how reading instruction is planned, structured, and aligned with curriculum expectations. Document analysis complements observational and interview data by providing insight into the intended versus enacted curriculum (Morgan, 2022).

The use of these multiple data sources enables methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Flick, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). More importantly, it allows the study to capture reading instruction as a multi-layered phenomenon, involving planning, implementation, and interaction.

Procedures

The procedures of the study consisted of four main stages. First, the researcher conducted preliminary observations to identify the general classroom conditions, availability of learning resources, and the implementation of reading instruction in English classes. These observations also helped the researcher establish rapport with teachers and students before the formal data

collection process. Second, classroom observations were conducted in the participating schools. During these observations, the researcher documented teacher–student interactions, reading activities, instructional strategies, the use of teaching materials, and students’ responses during reading lessons. Field notes were taken systematically to capture classroom discourse and instructional practices in real learning situations. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the three English teachers. The interviews focused on exploring teachers’ perceptions of the challenges in teaching reading, their instructional decision-making, and the adaptive strategies they used to support students’ comprehension in low-resource contexts. Each interview was conducted in a flexible manner to allow teachers to elaborate on their experiences and classroom practices. Fourth, document analysis was conducted by examining lesson plans, teaching materials, worksheets, and other instructional documents used during reading instruction. This stage aimed to identify the relationship between curriculum expectations and actual classroom implementation. After all data had been collected, the researcher organized and analyzed the data using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s framework. The analysis process involved familiarizing with the data, coding significant information, identifying recurring themes, reviewing and refining themes, and interpreting the findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was applied by comparing data obtained from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. In addition, member checking was conducted with the teachers to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) and further refined in Braun & Clarke (2021). This approach involves: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme development, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) report production.

Thematic analysis is conceptually appropriate for this study because it allows for a systematic yet flexible interpretation of qualitative data, enabling the researcher to identify patterns across different data sources while remaining sensitive to contextual nuances (Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017). In this study, the analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to: structural challenges in reading instruction, and teacher adaptive strategies in low-resource contexts. Attention was given to micro-level classroom practices, including how teachers scaffold comprehension, manage limited resources, and engage students in reading activities. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied qualitative rigor criteria, including: credibility (through triangulation and member checking), dependability (through systematic documentation of procedures), and confirmability (through transparent data analysis processes). These strategies are essential for strengthening the validity of findings in qualitative research, particularly in context-specific studies

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the major themes that emerged from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with 2 English teachers, and document analysis conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Tiakur involving 60 student participants. The analysis focuses on how reading instruction is enacted in everyday classroom practice and how teachers adapt instructional strategies in response to structural limitations within a 3T educational context.

The findings of this study should be understood within the broader context of literacy inequality in Indonesia, particularly in 3T regions. National reports continue to show disparities in educational quality and literacy achievement between urban and remote areas. According to PISA 2022 results, Indonesian students’ reading literacy achievement remains below the international average, with geographical and socioeconomic inequalities significantly influencing

learning outcomes (OECD, 2023). Reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology further indicate that schools in remote regions frequently face shortages of qualified teachers, limited access to instructional materials, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted exposure to literacy environments. In eastern Indonesian regions such as Maluku Barat Daya, geographical isolation and transportation challenges further limit educational access and resource distribution. These structural inequalities are reflected in the classroom realities observed at SMP Negeri 2 Tiakur, where reading instruction is continuously shaped by limited resources and contextual constraints.

Limited Teaching Resources

Across all observed junior high school classrooms, a consistent pattern emerged regarding the scarcity of instructional resources. Observational data showed that students often shared limited textbooks, with some classes relying on a single book for group use. Teachers frequently supplemented materials by writing texts on the board or distributing photocopied content. Interview data revealed that teachers perceived this limitation as a major obstacle to implementing effective reading instruction at the junior high school level, where curriculum demands require exposure to more complex texts and genres. Document analysis further indicated that lesson plans were often constrained by material availability rather than pedagogical design. Conceptually, this reflects restricted opportunity-to-learn conditions, where limited access to varied reading materials reduces students' ability to engage with texts appropriate to their cognitive and linguistic level. At the junior high school level, this limitation becomes more critical, as students are expected to develop higher-order comprehension skills.

Low Vocabulary Proficiency

A dominant theme across all data sources was students' low vocabulary proficiency, which significantly influenced reading instruction. Classroom observations showed that many students struggled to understand basic vocabulary, often relying on word-by-word translation during reading tasks. Teachers consistently reported that students at the junior high school level lacked sufficient vocabulary to comprehend texts aligned with the curriculum. As a result, reading activities were frequently slowed down, focusing more on vocabulary explanation than on comprehension or interpretation. Conceptually, this indicates that lexical limitations constrain cognitive processing, preventing students from engaging in higher-level reading tasks such as inference and critical understanding. In this context, reading remains largely at the level of decoding rather than meaning construction.

Limited Exposure to English

The findings also highlight that students have minimal exposure to English beyond the classroom, a condition that significantly affects learning at the junior high school level. Observations confirmed that English use was limited to classroom interaction, with little reinforcement outside school. Teachers noted that students rarely encounter English in daily life, resulting in limited familiarity with vocabulary, sentence structures, and text conventions. This lack of exposure contributes to students' low confidence and passive participation during reading activities. Conceptually, this reflects a condition of input scarcity, where students lack sufficient linguistic input to support language acquisition. At the junior high school level, where curriculum expectations assume increasing language proficiency, this gap becomes more pronounced, requiring additional instructional support.

Teacher Adaptation Strategies

Despite these constraints, teachers demonstrated strong adaptive pedagogical practices to sustain reading instruction. These strategies were consistently identified across observations, interviews, and documents.

Use of Contextually Relevant Texts: Teachers adapted reading materials by incorporating familiar topics and local contexts. This strategy helped junior high school students connect new vocabulary with prior knowledge, facilitating comprehension of otherwise challenging texts.

Code-Switching as Instructional Scaffolding: Code-switching between English and Indonesian or local languages was widely used to explain vocabulary and clarify meaning. In this context, code-switching functioned as a scaffolding strategy, enabling students to access content that would otherwise be beyond their linguistic level.

Collaborative Reading Practices: Group discussions and peer interaction were frequently observed, allowing students to negotiate meaning collectively. This suggests that reading comprehension is supported through social interaction, particularly when individual linguistic resources are limited.

Low-Technology Instructional Strategies: Teachers relied on simple materials such as whiteboards, flashcards, and printed texts. These strategies demonstrate how instruction is adapted based on resource availability, rather than technological support.

The findings reveal a dual dynamic in junior high school reading instruction within this 3T context. Structural constraints—limited resources, low vocabulary proficiency, and restricted exposure—significantly shape the learning environment. At the same time, teachers actively respond through adaptive and context-sensitive practices. Importantly, the findings show that reading instruction at the junior high school level in Maluku Barat Daya is characterized by continuous negotiation between curriculum demands and contextual realities. This positions teachers as key agents in mediating learning under constrained conditions, highlighting the importance of understanding classroom-level practices in addressing educational inequality.

The findings of this study reveal that reading instruction in junior high school EFL classrooms in Maluku Barat Daya is shaped by a complex interaction between structural constraints and teacher adaptive practices. These results can be interpreted through three key conceptual lenses: lexical theory, sociocultural theory, and policy–practice alignment.

Reading Constraints as Lexical and Input Limitations

The findings highlight that limited vocabulary knowledge and restricted exposure to English are central barriers to reading comprehension. Students' reliance on word-by-word translation and difficulty in understanding basic vocabulary indicate that reading processes remain at a surface level, preventing deeper comprehension. This can be explained through the Lexical Quality Hypothesis proposed by Charles A. Perfetti and further supported by Nation (2022). According to this framework, reading comprehension depends on the quality of lexical representations. When vocabulary knowledge is limited, students cannot efficiently process textual information or integrate meaning across sentences.

In the context of Maluku Barat Daya, these lexical limitations are further intensified by input scarcity. Students' minimal exposure to English outside the classroom reduces opportunities to develop vocabulary breadth and depth. As a result, reading instruction is constrained not only by students' internal capacities but also by external conditions that limit language input. These findings reinforce recent international research showing that vocabulary development and exposure are foundational to reading success in EFL contexts, particularly in low-resource environments. However, unlike well-resourced settings where exposure can be supplemented through technology and extensive reading, students in 3T areas rely almost entirely on classroom instruction, making lexical development more challenging.

Despite these constraints, the study demonstrates that teachers play a critical role in sustaining learning through adaptive pedagogical practices. Strategies such as code-switching, use of local texts, and collaborative learning function as mechanisms to bridge gaps between students' current abilities and instructional demands. These practices can be understood through Sociocultural Theory developed by Lev Vygotsky, which conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process. In this framework, knowledge is constructed through interaction, language, and the use of mediational tools. In the absence of adequate resources, teachers themselves become the primary mediators of learning. For example: a. Code-switching operates as a linguistic scaffold, enabling students to access meaning beyond their current proficiency level, b. Collaborative reading activities create opportunities for peer-mediated learning, where understanding is co-constructed through interaction, c. Use of locally relevant texts connects new knowledge with students' existing cultural and experiential frameworks.

These findings also align with recent work on teacher agency (Borg, 2021; Farrell & Macapinlac, 2022), which emphasizes that teachers actively interpret and adapt instructional practices based on contextual realities. In this study, teacher adaptation is not merely a response to limitations but represents a form of professional expertise that enables learning to occur under constrained conditions. However, it is important to note that such adaptive practices, while effective at the classroom level, are largely situational and unsystematic, depending heavily on individual teacher capacity rather than institutional support.

Policy–Practice Mismatch in 3T Contexts

A key implication of these findings is the existence of a persistent policy–practice mismatch. National curriculum frameworks and literacy policies often assume conditions such as adequate resources, sufficient exposure to English, and relatively homogeneous learning environments. However, the realities observed in this study suggest that these assumptions do not hold in 3T regions. This mismatch can be understood through the work of Tikly (2020), who argues that education policy must be context-sensitive to be effective. When policies are implemented without adaptation to local conditions, they risk reinforcing rather than reducing inequality. In the case of Maluku Barat Daya: a. Curriculum expectations require students to engage with texts that exceed their vocabulary level, b. Instructional approaches assume access to diverse materials and digital tools, c. Assessment standards do not fully account for disparities in exposure and learning conditions. As a result, teachers are positioned as frontline mediators, tasked with reconciling policy demands with classroom realities. While they demonstrate strong adaptability, relying solely on teacher initiative places an unsustainable burden on educators and limits the scalability of effective practices.

Toward Context-Sensitive Literacy Development

The findings of this study suggest that improving reading instruction in 3T contexts requires a shift from standardized approaches to context-sensitive frameworks. Rather than viewing limitations as deficits, it is necessary to recognize the role of context in shaping both challenges and solutions. From a theoretical perspective, this involves integrating a. Lexical approaches, which emphasize vocabulary development and input, b. Sociocultural perspectives, which highlight interaction and mediation, and c. Policy frameworks, which must be flexible and responsive to local realities. From a practical perspective, this implies a. prioritizing vocabulary-rich instruction adapted to students' levels, b. supporting teacher adaptive practices through training and resources, and c. designing policies that allow localized implementation rather than uniform standards.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that reading instruction in a 3T educational context is deeply influenced by structural inequality, limited educational resources, and restricted exposure to English. The findings suggest that students' reading difficulties cannot be understood solely as individual learning problems, but rather as outcomes shaped by broader contextual limitations affecting literacy development in remote regions. The study further reveals that teachers function not only as curriculum implementers but also as adaptive mediators who continuously negotiate between policy expectations and classroom realities. Instructional practices such as code-switching, collaborative learning, and the use of locally relevant texts represent context-sensitive pedagogical responses that enable literacy learning to continue despite resource limitations. More importantly, the findings highlight that improving literacy development in 3T regions requires educational policies that are flexible, equitable, and responsive to local realities. Sustainable literacy improvement depends not only on curriculum standards but also on teacher support, access to learning resources, and the creation of literacy-rich environments adapted to marginalized contexts. By providing classroom-based evidence from Maluku Barat Daya, this study contributes to a more contextualized understanding of literacy instruction and educational inequality in remote Indonesian settings.

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Bridging Educational Inequality: Reading Instruction in Remote Indonesia and Its Policy Implications

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