FOREMOST JOURNAL | **e-ISSN: 2721-642X**
Vol. 7, No. 2, July 2026, Pg.205-220
http://ejournal.unis.ac.id/index.php/Foremost

Exploring English Teachers' Principles and Challenges in Developing ESP Learning Materials for Vocational School Level

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Article Info

Article History:

Submission: 2026-06-23

Revised: 2026-06-04

Accepted: 2026-07-18

Published: 2026-07-31

Keywords:

ESP Learning Materials;
Material Development Principles;
Vocational High School

ABSTRACT

The limited relevance of general English textbooks to the specific language needs of different vocational programs underscores the necessity of eveloping appropriate ESP learning materials. This study proposed to explore the principles applied and challenges faced by English VHS teachers with various programs when developing ESP learning materials. A qualitative case study design was adopted in the study, with participants consisting of three English VHS teachers representing the majors of DKV, Maritime, and DPIB. Research data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis supported by data triangulation. The results showed that the participants demonstrated varying degrees of application of the six dimensions of learning material development adapted from Tomlinson (2003), which include alignment with the curriculum and SKKNI, accommodation of student learning characteristics, contextualization of learning material content, suitability of design and layout, and clarity of instructions. Based on interview results and document analysis, several aspects related to the contextualization of learning materials remain absent in certain areas, such as prior knowledge, which is not reflected in the learning materials developed by all participants, as well as balanced language skills, critical thinking, and cultural representation, which remain limited. Furthermore, this study also identified several challenges faced by participants during the learning materials development process, including difficulties in finding appropriate learning resources, adapting the materials to students' majors, time constraints, and difficulties in generating innovative learning ideas. The results of this study showed that the development of VHS learning materials is an ongoing process that requires pedagogical competence, professional collaboration, creativity, and continuous reflection. Hence, these factors are crucial in supporting that learning materials remain relevant to students' vocational needs and the needs of the workplace.

To Cite This Article:

Nuruzzahroh Subhiyah, & Agustina, N. (2026). Exploring English Teachers' Principles and Challenges in Developing ESP Learning Materials for Vocational School Level. *Foremost Journal*, 7(2), 205–220. https://doi.org/10.33592/foremost.v7i2.9196

e-ISSN: 2721-642X

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning materials play a necessary role in English Language Teaching (ELT) because they provide the primary resources that support teachers in planning instructional activities, facilitating students' learning, and achieving the intended learning objectives (Fitriah, 2020; Kusuma & Apriyanto, 2018; Vitta, 2023). Moreover, developing learning material also increases the students' skills from the lower to the higher portion (Fitriah, 2020). In carrying out the development of learning materials, the teacher carefully considers the needs of the students first, followed by adjusting the methods, teaching techniques, and the design of the teaching media. Moreover, to be an effective language learning material could be developed through productive and systematic work, including the cooperation between educators, methodologists, and specialists in information and communication technologies (Fedotova, 2023). Focusing on the scope and depth of collaboration, taking into account both enabling and impeding factors, and transforming schools into learning organizations are all essential components of effective collaboration in education (Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Moreover, ESP is a language teaching method in which content and methodology are determined by the reasons why students are learning the language. Therefore, ESP does not refer to a specific variety of English, but rather to a teaching approach that prioritizes students' needs. In the context of Vocational High School (VHS), ESP is highly relevant because students must prepare for specific fields of expertise and future careers. Moreover, ESP instruction is designed to meet learners' specific needs and is linked to particular disciplines or fields of work. Findings by Santika et al. (2022) indicate that Multimedia students in vocational schools require English materials tailored to their professional needs, such as technical vocabulary and content that is genuinely relevant to the workplace.

Accordingly, ESP-focused learning materials may encompass topics, vocabulary, texts, and activities aligned with the students' fields of study. Aziz & Anjaniputra (2025) found that ESP implementation in vocational schools must be adapted to students' needs and diverse specialization programs to ensure that materials and learning activities better reflect real-world contexts. Furthermore, Fuadul Matin (2022) observed that the English materials currently used in vocational schools tend to focus on general English proficiency and do not yet fully address the specific requirements of individual specialization programs. Consequently, developing materials that incorporate the vocational context is crucial for aligning English instruction with students' academic and professional needs.

To support the development of effective learning materials, Tomlinson (2003) proposed a set of principles emphasizing learner needs, meaningful learning experiences, learner engagement, and contextual

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relevance. However, considering the specific characteristics of vocational education in Indonesia, this study adopts and adapts several dimensions derived from Tomlinson's principles and relevant vocational education literature.

Accordingly, six dimensions are used as the analytical framework of this study: [1]. Alignment with the curriculum [2]. Alignment with the Indonesian national work competency standard/*Standar Kompetensi Kerja Nasional Indonesia* (SKKNI) [3]. Accommodation of students' learning styles (visual, audio, and kinaesthetic) [4]. Contextualization of learning content [5]. Effective design and layout [6]. clarity of instructions. These dimensions provide a framework for examining how English teachers develop learning materials that address both educational objectives and vocational demands.

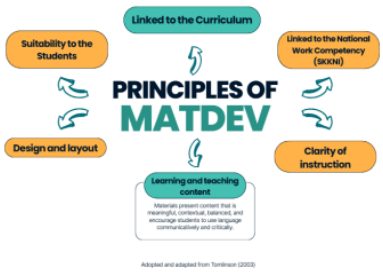


Figure 1 Tomlinson's Principles of Developing Learning Material

In addition, Rahmawati et al. (2021) explored the process of developing English learning materials and the challenges experienced by a vocational school English teacher using the framework of Hutchinson and Waters. These studies have contributed valuable insights into vocational English material development and highlighted the importance of aligning learning materials with learners' needs and vocational contexts.

However, previous studies focused on a single vocational program or a single teacher context. As vocational programs differ in competency standards, workplace communication practices, and student characteristics, there remains limited understanding of how English teachers across different vocational programs apply material development principles and address the challenges encountered during the development process. Consequently, the existing literature provides only a partial understanding of ESP material development across diverse vocational contexts.

To address this gap, the present study explores the principles applied by English teachers when developing ESP learning materials and investigates the challenges they encounter across different vocational programs. The study focuses on three vocational contexts, namely Visual Communication Design (DKV), Maritime Studies, and Building Design and Information Modeling (DPIB). Different with previous studies that examined a single vocational setting, this study provides a cross-program perspective on ESP material development and contributes a broader understanding of how vocational characteristics influence teachers' material development practices.

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Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What principles of learning material development are used by English teachers in different vocational programs when developing ESP learning materials? and (2) What challenges do English teachers face when developing ESP learning materials across different vocational programs?

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method to explore the principles used and the challenges faced by VHS English teachers in developing English learning materials. Qualitative research was selected because the study enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and practices within their natural contexts. Furthermore, qualitative research provides a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon through descriptive and non-numerical data (Lim, 2024).

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach. A case study approach is appropriate when a researcher seeks to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context through an in-depth exploration using multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2019). The case examined in this study is the development of English learning materials in VHS in North Jakarta. Through this approach, the researcher explored how VHS English teachers develop learning materials, the principles they apply during the material development process, and the challenges that English teachers encounter. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria for participation in this study were: (1) actively teaching English at a VHS; (2) being involved in developing, designing, or adapting English learning materials; (3) having at least one year of teaching experience in a VHS; and (4) being willing to participate in the study. The study was conducted from October 2025 to June 2026, covering the stages of proposal development, instrument preparation, data collection, and data analysis. To give comprehensive data, this study uses semi-structured interviews as the primary data source, while document analysis of learning materials developed by participant teachers serves as the secondary data source. Moreover, incorporating these two sources helped the researcher gain a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study and strengthened the credibility of the findings through data triangulation. In addition, interview data and document analysis are systematically analyzed to obtain information related to the principles of learning material development applied and the challenges faced during the development process.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The findings showed that the three VHS English teachers generally applied the principles of learning material development, although the implementation varied across teachers

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and vocational programs. The main principles found in the data were curriculum alignment, vocational relevance, accommodation of students' learning characteristics, contextualized content, cooperative learning, communicative activities, language-skill balance, critical thinking, cultural representation, layout, and clear instructions.

All participants used the curriculum as a reference when developing their learning materials. T1 and T3 mainly referred to the Learning Outcomes (CP) and adapted English materials to students' vocational fields. T2 also reported using the Learning Outcomes and discussing material development with other teachers through the MGMP. However, the document analysis showed that T2's materials were still organized using Basic Competencies (KD) from the 2013 Curriculum. This shows that the curriculum used in practice was not always consistent with what teachers reported in the interviews.

The teachers also tried to make the materials relevant to students' vocational fields and future workplaces. T1 connected English activities with Visual Communication Design, such as poster design and presentations. T2 used maritime topics, including shipboard safety, seaman roles, and cargo handling. T3 used construction-related topics such as site work and construction. However, none of the participants used SKKNI as a main reference when developing the materials. Instead, they mostly focused on workplace needs and vocational competencies. T3 showed a stronger effort to connect the materials with industry needs by discussing them with vocational subject teachers.

The findings also showed that all participants considered students' different learning characteristics. T1 included visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities, such as videos, listening tasks, presentations, and poster projects. T2 and T3 mainly used visual and kinesthetic activities through pictures, discussions, role plays, and group activities. However, auditory activities were not clearly found in T2's and T3's materials. Furthermore, this relates to the diverse characteristics of students, which need to be accommodated when developing learning materials.

Another strong finding was contextualized content. All three teachers adapted English topics to students' vocational backgrounds. However, the use of students' prior knowledge and experience was more visible in classroom practice than in the materials. The teachers reported using questions, discussions, and familiar examples before introducing new topics, but these activities were not clearly found in the analyzed documents. Cooperative learning was consistently found in the materials of all three teachers. Students were involved in group discussions, pair work, interviews, role plays, presentations, and collaborative projects. In contrast, opportunities for communicative language use were stronger in T1 and T2 than in T3. T1 and T2 included presentations,

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dialogues, interviews, and role plays, while T3's materials mainly focused on reading and vocabulary activities. The balance of language skills also differed among the participants. T1's materials covered listening, speaking, reading, and writing, although some skills were less emphasized. T2 included reading, speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, but listening was not clearly included. T3 mainly focused on reading, speaking, and vocabulary, with limited evidence of listening, writing, and grammar activities. Therefore, none of the materials showed a fully balanced development of language skills. For critical thinking, all teachers reported using activities such as guiding questions, HOTS questions, inference questions, and open-ended questions. However, these activities were not always visible in the materials. Only T1's materials contained a clear activity that required students to think about their future plans and the steps needed to achieve them. This suggests that critical-thinking activities were sometimes part of classroom practice rather than explicitly included in the materials. The representation of culture was relatively limited. T1 included Indonesian and international names and countries, while T2 included international figures and geographical locations. T3 considered culture mainly through social customs and workplace etiquette, but these elements were not clearly found in the analyzed materials.

Finally, all participants considered layout and instructions important. Their materials generally used relevant pictures, readable text, and organized activities. However, some limitations remained, such as condensed layouts, low-quality or black-and-white images, incomplete instructions, and missing information about audio sources. These findings show that the teachers had considered the clarity and appearance of their materials, but some aspects still needed improvement.

In applying the principles of developing English language learning materials at the VHS level. Based on the interview results, participants explained several challenges, including difficulty in finding appropriate learning content and resources, difficulty in adapting materials to the diverse vocations and characteristics of students, and difficulty in finding time and ideas when developing learning materials. First, T1 and T3 stated that the common challenges are identifying the appropriate content, which is related to students' characteristics and needs. T1 said that *"Finding materials that are both relevant and appropriate for their level of knowledge is quite difficult. Whenever I introduce a particular issue, I first have to make sure that they understand it. If they do not, I need to explain it before moving on to a deeper discussion."* According to T1's statement, student diversity can lead to teachers' habit of providing additional explanations before students can engage in more complex discussions. Furthermore, T1's statement above also explained that T1 found difficulty in finding learning resources such as videos and

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audiovisual materials that were appropriate to the students' vocational and English language skills. Furthermore, T3 stated that T3 also experienced difficulties in finding authentic sources that suited the students' needs. The following is evidence of T3's statement regarding the difficulty in finding authentic sources *"Finding authentic sources is quite difficult. Even when I find suitable ones, they usually still need to be adapted because they are sometimes too difficult or contain topics that students have not yet studied" (T3).*

Second, the difficulty in adapting learning materials is due to differences in vocational backgrounds and diverse student characteristics. This finding relates to the first difficulty outlined in the previous paragraph. T1 reiterated that the biggest challenge is understanding the diverse vocational backgrounds and characteristics of students. Therefore, teachers need to pay attention to learning materials that are appropriate to the vocational background and could be applied to the diverse characteristics of students. T1's statement was conveyed *"Sometimes the biggest challenge is understanding the vocational program itself. If we do not understand the context of the program, it is difficult to determine suitable learning materials." (T1).* Similar to statement T3, which stated, *"Sometimes materials that work well in one vocational program are not necessarily suitable for another. We need to adjust them according to the needs and characteristics of students in each program." (T3)*.

Finally, participants sometimes felt that developing learning materials was difficult due to limited time and limited concentration in finding ideas. This difficulty was expressed by T2: *"The biggest challenge is generating ideas, finding ideas for the next lesson." (T2)*. Meanwhile, T3 delivered a statement: *"The biggest challenge is time. Searching for materials, adapting them to the vocational program, and developing learning activities all require a considerable amount of time." (T3)*.

To overcome these difficulties, efforts are made to improve teachers' ability to select, simplify, and adapt learning materials. Several strategies are implemented, focusing on collaboration, independent search for learning material sources, and continuous evaluation, as stated by participants in the interviews. T1 explained that learning materials were developed through discussions with various reference sources and the selection of sources tailored to students' needs. Furthermore, T1 also stated that utilizing student feedback in class is very useful in providing students with a level of understanding of the learning materials provided. Furthermore, T2 provided a statement that also supports T1's statement, namely that discussions with fellow teachers, especially in the MGMP forum, where exchanging ideas and experiences has a very influential role in the development of English learning materials. The final statement from T3, which prioritizes collaboration

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with teachers in the vocational field, provides greater competence and content suitability to the needs of students in the major. Finally, T3 also stated that T3 develops learning materials based on observations of learning materials and teaching experience in the classroom and feedback from students.

3.2 Discussion

Once the curriculum requirements are met, participants adapt the English learning materials to create a more meaningful learning process. This aligns with previous findings in Law Number 20 of 2003, which discusses the definition of curriculum in the National Education System (Indonesia, 2003). It explains that the curriculum serves as a guideline because it discusses learning objectives, content, materials, and teaching methods. In designing learning, the current curriculum that is mostly implemented is the Merdeka curriculum, where teachers have great flexibility in adapting their learning materials according to the characteristics and context of the learning to make it more relevant and meaningful (Fadlia et al., 2022; Ferdaus & Novita, 2023; Hasibuan & Agustina, 2023; Lestari & Priyana, 2020; Sari et al., 2020).

In addition to aligning with the curriculum, learning materials must also align with the SKKNI. Aligning learning materials with the SKKNI aims to provide students with knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes related to future work demands (Widiaty, 2019). The SKKNI document, released by the Ministry of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia or *Kemnaker*, outlines job duties in detail, consistent with the specific field of work. The SKKNI significantly assists English vocational high school teachers in building meaningful relationships and adapting learning materials through activities such as communication, professional skills, teamwork, and problem-solving (Pusriawan & Soenarto, 2019). This creates learning environments in the classroom and in real-life situations, enabling students to feel more engaged (Pusriawan & Soenarto, 2019; Tomlinson, 2003). However, the results of this study indicate limited adaptation to the inclusion of the SKKNI in the development of learning materials. The findings of this study suggest providing an authentic workplace with related learning experiences that foster communication, teamwork, problem-solving skills, and career readiness that have not yet been fully optimized (Elsayed et al., 2024; Pusriawan & Soenarto, 2019).

The findings related to student characteristics show that T1 combines visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities. However, the learning materials in T2 and T3 are still dominated by visual and kinesthetic activities. These findings support the VAK (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) learning style framework proposed by previous findings (Silitonga et al., 2020). The support in the form of images, videos, presentations, discussions, and collaborative activities demonstrates

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the efforts of VHS English teachers in adapting learning materials to meet the learning needs of students at the VHS level. Moreover, the adaptation might contribute to the students' English achievement and motivation (Chen, 2023; Lin, 2024; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2020).

The fourth principle is related to the content of the English learning materials developed, which must be contextualized, connected to prior knowledge, collaborative, balance student skills, promote critical thinking, and also demonstrate Indonesian culture and the culture of other countries. The results of this finding indicate that all participants have attempted to contextualize the content of the learning materials by determining and adjusting the students' vocations. If the learning materials are adapted, it will certainly increase the meaningfulness of the experience in the learning process, especially in each student's field (Fatah et al., 2025; Haryudin et al., 2020). However, regarding the connection to prior knowledge, not all participants have adapted it in developing the learning materials. This needs to be considered, as research from Arunika & Agustina (2026) which states that learning materials need to be created from activities that activate students' prior knowledge by using brainstorming, thus creating opportunities for collaborative and communicative activities in the learning process. However, all participants have observed and adapted collaborative learning methods. This finding aligns with previous research, which states that collaborative activities significantly support the benefits of collaborative learning in creating more communicative learning (Ismail & Al Allaq, 2019; Morar et al., 2021; Yadav, 2025). Next, the findings of this study suggest that greater attention to VHS English teachers should be given the critical thinking aspect in developing the learning materials such as activities that help students to analyse problem, evaluate evidence, and also formulate the logical conclusion (Ilyas, 2018; Ranbir, 2024; Tofade et al., 2013). From an analysis of this study, found that the content of the learning material needs to be reconsidered, focusing on activities that foster critical thinking in students and facilitate cultural learning, as some participants have not yet developed learning materials with these two principles in mind. This suggestion comes because culturally relevant learning materials would help students connect new learning with their own cultural background and also awareness of other cultures (Mahardika & Agung, 2018).

Overall, the materials incorporated the clear design and layout by integrating the images or visual elements to make the content easier to comprehend. However, the suitability of these visual elements varied across the learning materials. Certain images required further attention regarding legibility, relevance to the accompanying content, and clarity in facilitating the learning process. Consequently, the assessment of visual design went

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beyond merely checking for the use of color, this also evaluated whether the images were sufficiently clear, appropriate, and useful for the intended learning objectives. These findings are supported by previous research indicating that proper layout, readable font sizes, and clear images could help students better understand the material and enhance their learning process (J et al., 2021; Jusuf, 2022; Yasin & Mohamad, 2024). Lastly, there was clarity of instructions in the learning materials. There were several areas for improvement in the clarity of instructions. Some participants still needed to work on developing the learning materials. This was evident in the instructions, which were still simple and needed clarity and clarification in the instructions already created. This is noteworthy and aligns with previous research that demonstrated that clarity of instructions can also increase student motivation to learn (Sofian & Jufenna, 2024; Syaifuddin et al., 2022).

Despite adapting the learning materials, all participants faced challenges in the development process. These challenges included difficulty in determining the content of the learning materials due to limited learning resources appropriate to the students' majors, requiring participants to find new ideas. Moreover, participants also faced challenges when developing the learning materials to address the diverse vocational backgrounds and students' characteristics. These challenges were not experienced in the same way by all participants. For T1, the main challenge was finding content and learning resources that matched the students' characteristics, their English language skills, and their vocational backgrounds. T1 explained that the material taught must be appropriate to the students' level of knowledge because students sometimes require additional explanations to engage in more complex discussions. T1 also complained about the difficulty of finding videos and audiovisual resources that matched the major topics and students' English language skills. Furthermore, T1 found understanding the vocational program itself a major challenge, as it was difficult to determine the appropriate learning materials without understanding the program's background. These challenges further hampered the process of adapting and matching the materials. For T1, the challenge was not only finding resources but also determining whether existing resources could be linked to the vocational material while remaining easily understood and accessible to students. This relates to (Abidah et al. (2023), who stated that English learning materials in vocational schools should address the specific needs of the vocational field and appropriate learning methods for students, rather than focusing solely on general English language materials. Therefore, the challenges faced by T1 indicate that efforts are needed to balance the importance of vocational material with the level of ability and characteristics of the language used by students.

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Moreover, T3 faced challenges largely similar to those of T1, but more explicitly related to the availability and adaptation of original resources. T3 stated that finding original resources was difficult, and even suitable resources often had to be modified because they were too difficult or covered topics students had not previously covered. T3 also stated that materials suitable for one vocational program might not be applicable in another program because they had to be adapted to the needs and unique characteristics of students in each program. This challenge affected the contextualization and appropriateness of the materials. Genuinely original resources might provide more specific explanations, but their level of difficulty might not align with students' current knowledge. Therefore, T3 had to modify resources to ensure they remained relevant to the vocational program and remained easily understood and accessible to students. This finding aligns with Anwas (2024), who found that resource limitations were a barrier to developing the learning materials. However, in T3's context, the challenge was not only related to resource availability but also to the need for modifications to existing resources before they could be used by students.

Different from T1 and T3, T2 specifically identified the difficulty in generating ideas for subsequent materials as a major challenge. T2 stated that her biggest challenge was finding ideas for subsequent lesson materials. This challenge demonstrates that creating learning materials is not only about selecting the right resources, but also about continuously creating content and learning activities that can help the learning process run smoothly. Also different from T1 and T3, whose challenges were more directly related to selecting and adapting content to students' needs and vocational contexts, T2's challenges were more related to the process of generating new ideas for subsequent learning activities. This difference may be due to the need to maintain fluidity and variety of materials across lessons. Therefore, the challenges faced by T2 impact the development process, particularly in generating new material ideas, rather than simply being related to the suitability of specific resources.

The findings also revealed that participants had different approaches to addressing these challenges. T1 addressed these challenges by exploring and comparing various reference sources, selecting materials tailored to students' needs, and utilizing classroom feedback to assess students' understanding. T2 emphasized the importance of discussions with other English teachers, particularly through the MGMP forum, where teachers could share ideas and experiences in developing learning materials. T3 emphasized the importance of collaborating with vocational teachers to ensure English materials better align with the needs of students in each major. T3 also considered learning materials, teaching experience, and

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student input when creating and disseminating these materials. These different strategies addressed the different challenges faced by the participants. T1 utilized student feedback relevant to the challenge of adapting the materials to students' ability levels, while T2 collaborated with other English teachers to help overcome difficulties in generating new ideas. Meanwhile, T3's collaboration with vocational teachers was particularly well-suited to the challenge of ensuring the materials were appropriate for specific vocational programs.

The differences between the participants indicate that the difficulty in creating English language materials for vocational education could not be considered a single problem for everyone. Although T1 and T3 both experienced difficulties in identifying and adapting appropriate content, their challenges differed in focus. T1 struggled to maintain a balance between students' English language skills, their characteristics, and the vocational environment, while T3 experienced greater difficulty in finding and adapting sources to make them more accessible to students. On the other hand, T2 struggled to generate ideas for subsequent lesson materials. These differences can be explained by the fact that each vocational program has different needs in developing materials. DKV requires materials that are related to the specific vocational context in which students are enrolled, yet still accessible and appropriate to their language abilities. DPIB requires adapting authentic and vocationally relevant content, in line with students' existing knowledge. While the maritime context requires teachers to continuously develop appropriate lesson ideas that are appropriate to the specific vocational environment. Therefore, the same challenge in developing appropriate learning materials could influence different aspects of material development, depending on the vocational program and the characteristics of the students.

Previous research has provided several approaches teachers might use to address these challenges. Anwas (2024) and Beuken et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of collaboration between schools, teachers, and industry as a way to identify the capabilities and skills required in specific vocational fields. This collaboration could provide VHS English teachers with additional insights when selecting materials appropriate to their areas of expertise. Moreover, VHS English teachers need sufficient time to find resources, adapt materials, and create appropriate learning activities. Bharuthram (2018) and Nur et al. (2024) also emphasized that sufficient time and sustained effort are crucial in the development process. Participants provided further strategies that demonstrate how these challenges could be addressed with various forms of support, such as collaborating with other English teachers, collaborating with vocational teachers, finding their own resources, and consistently listening to student feedback. Therefore, creating good vocational English learning materials

must take into account the specific challenges faced by each teacher, rather than simply applying the same method to all vocational programs.

4. CONCLUSION

This study showed that the three English teachers implemented the six dimensions of learning material development to varying degrees. Alignment between the curriculum and vocational application was maintained, while attention to students' learning styles was also clearly evident. Design and layout, as well as clear instructions, were only partially evident, while alignment with the SKKNI and balanced activities for various learning styles were only partially evident. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that the three teachers did not use all six aspects equally in designing or adapting their learning materials. The study also found that the teachers faced different challenges. T1 and T3 struggled to find and adapt appropriate content and resources, while T2 struggled to generate ideas, and T3 also experienced time constraints. The teachers addressed these challenges by collaborating, finding their own learning resources, listening to student feedback, and continuously evaluating and revising the materials.

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