# Integrating Local Wisdom into EFL Reading Materials: A Needs Analysis of Vocational Students in Eastern Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Vocational students often struggle to understand English texts that are complex and not related to their daily lives. In Eastern Indonesia, the lack of culturally relevant materials can reduce engagement and comprehension. Integrating local wisdom into reading materials can bridge this gap by connecting learning with students' experiences, supported by schema theory and culturally responsive pedagogy.

**Aims:** This study aimed to identify vocational students' needs for English reading materials incorporating local wisdom in Banggai Laut, Central Sulawesi, and to examine how cultural elements relate to students' reading challenges, learning needs, and preferences.

**Methods:** This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach using a descriptive survey design within a needs analysis framework. The analysis of target needs (lacks, needs, and wants) was informed by Hutchinson and Waters, while learning needs (input, procedures, teacher roles, learner roles, and settings) were based on Nunan. Twenty students from SMK Al-Hajar and SMK Negeri 2 Banggai participated during the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were collected through a 33-item Likert-scale online questionnaire. The data were analyzed using mean scores and percentages to identify dominant response patterns.

**Results:** The findings revealed that students experienced difficulties with complex sentence structures, technical vocabulary, and factual texts lacking cultural relevance. They reported strong needs for vocabulary support, culturally familiar topics, visual aids, and teacher guidance. Students preferred reading materials related to local folktales, coastal life, traditions, and regional history, and favored activities such as independent reading, small-group discussion, summarizing, highlighting keywords, and strategy modeling.

**Implications:** Mapping students' target and learning needs prior to material development is essential for vocational contexts. Incorporating local wisdom can support more engaging, comprehensible, and contextually relevant English learning aligned with students' cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords:** *Cultural elements; EFL reading materials; local wisdom; students' needs; reading challenges; reading preferences*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English instruction in vocational high schools is inherently oriented toward preparing learners for real-life communication and workplace tasks rather than purely academic achievement. Vocational students typically experience limited instructional time, practice-oriented learning objectives, and the need to acquire functional language skills applicable to daily and professional contexts (Mgoge & Kahangwa, 2024). These characteristics distinguish vocational English learning from general EFL settings and underscore the importance of instructional materials that align with students' immediate communicative needs, local environments, and future occupational demands (Ratri, 2024). Within this context, reading plays a crucial role because students must interpret functional texts such as manuals, instructions, reports, and digital information relevant to their fields (Sabouri, 2016; Khan & Iqbal, 2025; Navarrete, 2019).

However, research consistently indicates that vocational learners encounter persistent difficulties in reading comprehension. Limited vocabulary, unfamiliar topics, and low motivation often hinder students' ability to extract meaning from texts (Bensalah & Gueroudj, 2021). These challenges are exacerbated when learning materials are culturally distant from learners' lived experiences or anticipated workplace contexts. Materials that fail to reflect students' sociocultural realities tend to reduce engagement and limit meaningful comprehension. Conversely, studies demonstrate that culturally relevant and context-based materials can enhance both understanding and motivation by connecting new knowledge with learners' prior experiences (Ratri, 2024; Huda et al., 2024).

The issue becomes more pronounced in rural and geographically peripheral vocational contexts, where English exposure outside the classroom is minimal and textbooks serve as the primary source of linguistic input. Many commercially available English textbooks emphasise urban lifestyles and dominant target-language cultures, offering limited opportunities for learners to relate content to their own sociocultural backgrounds. Zhang and Nordin (2025) argue that while textbooks provide access to global perspectives, they often neglect local cultural representation. Similarly, Oktavianti et al. (2026) highlight that contextualised and authentic materials can significantly improve learners' engagement by linking classroom learning with real-life communication needs.

In response to these challenges, a growing body of research has focused on the integration of local culture into reading materials. Incorporating local wisdom enables learners to connect textual information with prior knowledge, thereby making reading more meaningful and accessible (Puripunyavanich, 2025). Empirical findings also suggest that culturally embedded materials contribute positively to comprehension and learning motivation (Mubarok et al., 2025). For vocational learners in particular, such materials are highly relevant because they support the practical orientation of learning and mirror real-life communicative situations (Ratri, 2024). The effectiveness of culturally responsive materials can be further explained through schema theory, which posits that comprehension occurs when learners relate new information to existing cognitive structures (Khan & Iqbal, 2025). When reading texts reflect learners' cultural

and occupational experiences, they are more likely to activate relevant background knowledge, interpret meaning accurately, and engage more deeply with content (Sabouri, 2016; Ratri, 2024).

Despite these theoretical and empirical insights, the integration of local wisdom into English reading materials for vocational students in Indonesia remains limited, particularly in rural settings. Existing materials often overlook learners' specific communicative goals, cultural familiarity, and learning preferences, even within the Merdeka Curriculum framework that promotes contextual and student-centred learning. Moreover, previous studies have tended to focus on the inclusion of cultural themes rather than systematically mapping students' linguistic and cultural needs as a foundation for material development. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by conducting a needs analysis of vocational students in Banggai Laut, Central Sulawesi, to identify their target and learning needs for English reading materials that incorporate local wisdom. By providing empirical evidence on students' linguistic challenges, cultural preferences, and learning expectations, the study aims to offer a basis for designing culturally responsive reading materials that enhance engagement, comprehension, and practical language use in vocational contexts.

## 1.1 Research Gap and Novelty

Previous studies in English language teaching have consistently reported that integrating cultural content into learning materials can enhance students' comprehension, engagement, and motivation (Marhamah, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2022; Khairiyah et al., 2021). These studies demonstrate the pedagogical value of culture-based materials, particularly in supporting meaningful learning experiences. However, a closer examination reveals several conceptual and methodological limitations. First, most studies primarily positioned local wisdom as thematic content embedded in reading texts rather than as a foundational framework for identifying learners' needs prior to material development. As a result, cultural integration was often treated as an instructional addition rather than as a needs-driven design principle. Second, the majority of previous research focused on general elementary or secondary school contexts, with limited attention to vocational education settings where learners' goals are more practice-oriented, time-constrained, and closely linked to workplace communication demands. This contextual difference suggests that findings from general education may not fully capture the specific learning characteristics of vocational students.

In addition, earlier studies rarely conducted systematic needs mapping that simultaneously examines students' linguistic challenges, cultural background, and learning preferences as an integrated basis for material development. For instance, Dama et al. (2024) highlight that student experience vocabulary and idea-development difficulties when texts are culturally distant, yet the study does not extend this insight into a comprehensive need's analysis framework. Consequently, there remains limited empirical evidence on how culturally specific needs can inform the design of reading materials, particularly in vocational contexts and geographically peripheral areas. Therefore, the key gap lies not merely in the lack of research on vocational students, but in the absence of culturally grounded needs analysis that positions local wisdom as a starting point for material design rather than as supplementary content. Addressing this gap is essential to better understand how linguistic needs, cultural familiarity, and learning preferences interact in shaping effective reading materials for vocational learners.

## 1.2 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:
1. What challenges do vocational students encounter in comprehending English texts, particularly those lacking cultural relevance?
2. What learning needs do vocational students identify for English reading materials that incorporate local wisdom?
3. What preferences do vocational students express regarding the content, design, and learning activities of local wisdom-based reading materials?

## 2. METHODS
### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey design within a need's analysis framework with a quantitative orientation. The design was selected because the purpose of the study was to systematically map vocational students' challenges, learning needs, and preferences regarding English reading materials that incorporate local wisdom, rather than to examine causal relationships or instructional effectiveness. By focusing on identifying learners' needs as they naturally occur, the design aligns with the exploratory nature of needs analysis in materials development research.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire to capture students' perceptions of their reading difficulties, expectations, and material preferences. The use of scaled responses enabled the researcher to quantify levels of agreement and identify dominant patterns across participants. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and percentages, to provide an empirical overview of learners' needs within their vocational learning context. Positioning the study as a survey-based needs analysis is methodologically appropriate because it allows the systematic identification of learners' target needs lacks, necessities, and wants as well as learning needs, which form the basis for materials development (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Nunan, 2004). In line with Sugiyono (2021), descriptive research aims to portray phenomena factually without manipulating variables. In this study, such an approach enables an objective description of students' needs within their real vocational learning environment.

### 2.2 Research Subjects

The study was conducted at two vocational high schools in Banggai Laut, Central Sulawesi, namely SMK Al-Hajar and SMK Negeri 2 Banggai. The study population consisted of students enrolled in the eleventh and twelfth grades during the 2024/2025 academic year. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select 20 students who had experienced English reading instruction and were therefore able to provide relevant insights into their learning challenges and needs.

The selected participants represented a heterogeneous group in terms of study programs, learning backgrounds, and prior exposure to English, ensuring variation in experiences and perspectives related to English reading and local cultural content. This diversity enabled the study to capture a broader range of learner needs within the two school contexts. Although the sample size was relatively small and the findings are presented using descriptive statistics, the study is exploratory and contextual in nature. Its primary objective is not to produce generalisable conclusions but to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' linguistic challenges, learning needs, and preferences within their specific vocational environment. Such a focus is consistent with needs analysis research, where the emphasis lies on generating contextual insights to inform

the development of locally relevant instructional materials.

## 2.3 Research Procedures

The research was conducted in three stages: preparation, implementation, and data analysis to ensure procedural clarity and replicability. In the preparation stage, the researcher identified the research context and reviewed relevant literature on needs analysis and local wisdom integration. Based on this framework, a 33-item Likert-scale questionnaire was developed to examine students' target needs and learning needs. The instrument was reviewed for clarity and relevance before being administered. During the implementation stage, the questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms. The link was shared with English teachers at both schools, who supervised the administration in their respective classes to ensure that students completed the questionnaire independently. Prior to responding, students received standardized instructions explaining how to answer the items carefully. They were informed that participation was voluntary, responses were anonymous, and there were no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire required approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. Teacher supervision during completion helped minimize perfunctory responses and reduce potential response bias. In the data analysis stage, all responses were exported and checked for completeness. The data were then organized and categorized into target needs and learning needs. Descriptive statistics in the form of percentages were used to summarize trends, followed by descriptive interpretation to explain patterns in relation to the research objectives. This systematic procedure ensured that the findings accurately reflected students' perceptions and contextual learning needs.

## 2.4 Research Instruments

The primary instrument of this study was a structured online questionnaire designed to identify students' needs for English reading materials incorporating local wisdom. The questionnaire consisted of 33 closed-ended items measured using a four-point Likert scale and was grounded in the need's analysis model proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), which served as the main analytical framework guiding the instrument development. Within this framework, the items were categorised into target needs (lacks, necessities, and wants) and learning needs to ensure alignment between theoretical constructs and measurable indicators. To operationalise the learning needs component, the questionnaire design was further informed by Nunan's (2004) task components, including input, procedures, teacher roles, learner roles, and learning settings. These dimensions were translated into structured Likert-scale statements to capture students' perceptions of reading difficulties, preferred text characteristics, instructional support, and learning activities.

The questionnaire covered aspects such as vocabulary challenges, comprehension of factual and culturally related texts, familiarity with local wisdom topics, and preferences for classroom tasks. The exclusive use of closed-ended items enabled systematic quantification of students' responses and facilitated the identification of general patterns across participants, consistent with the study's descriptive survey orientation. This structure supported the identification of priority areas for contextually relevant material development. Although the instrument did not include open-ended questions, it was intentionally designed to obtain structured and comparable data as a foundation for material development. Consequently, the findings should be understood as a contextual mapping of learners' needs rather than an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives, which is recognised as a methodological limitation.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a descriptive quantitative procedure to identify dominant patterns in students' responses. Students' answers were collected using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). Each response was converted into a numerical score, and mean scores were calculated for each item. Percentages were then derived from these mean scores to provide a clear representation of response tendencies. To ensure analytical transparency, predefined thresholds were established to categorize the level of student needs. Items with mean scores from 3.50 to 4.00 (87.5–100%) were classified as high-priority needs, indicating strong agreement among students and consistent relevance across respondents. Mean scores between 2.50 and 3.49 (62.5–87.25%) were considered moderate needs, reflecting partial agreement or mixed perceptions, while scores below 2.50 (<62.5%) were interpreted as lower-priority needs. These thresholds were determined analytically based on the distribution and midpoint of the Likert scale, ensuring that categorization reflects both quantitative tendencies and qualitative interpretations of students' perceived needs.

The results were subsequently organized according to the needs analysis framework, distinguishing target needs (lacks, necessities, and wants) and learning needs. Patterns within these categories were interpreted descriptively to identify recurring tendencies related to reading challenges, preferred content, and instructional support. By combining numerical scoring with structured interpretation criteria, the study provides a contextual mapping of students' needs rather than aiming for statistical generalization. The findings are therefore presented through mean scores, percentages, and analytical descriptions to identify priority areas for developing local wisdom–based reading materials in vocational contexts.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
### 3.1 Findings

This section reports the findings and discussion of the study, organized to address the three research questions: (1) What challenges do vocational students encounter in comprehending English texts, particularly those lacking cultural relevance? (2) What learning needs do vocational students identify for English reading materials that incorporate local wisdom? and (3) What preferences do vocational students express regarding the content, design, and learning activities of local wisdom-based reading materials?

### Students' Challenges in Reading English Texts (Lacks)
This subsection presents students' difficulties in reading English texts related to language complexity and unfamiliar content.

**Table 1** Students' Response on Lack Analysis

| Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Students struggle with long and complex English sentences. | 3,00 | 75 |
| Students find technical or academic vocabulary difficult. | 2,90 | 72,5 |
| Students have trouble understanding texts about local culture due to limited English references. | 2,90 | 72,5 |
| Students find factual texts like reports or news hard to comprehend. | 3,05 | 76,25 |

The analysis of the 20 students in the two vocational schools reveals a gap between their current reading ability and the demands of English texts. Difficulties arise when linguistic complexity, such as long sentences and technical vocabulary, intersects with unfamiliar contexts. Students frequently mentioned that unfamiliar vocabulary made texts "hard to imagine," indicating difficulty linking language with context. Students' expressed preferences for culturally familiar topics align with these needs, reflecting coherence between immediate interests and pedagogical support within this specific context.

## Students' Learning Needs in English Reading Materials (Needs)

Building on the identified lacks, the following section examines the specific forms of instructional support that students perceive as necessary for improving their reading comprehension.

**Table 2** Students' Response on Need Analysis

| Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Students need vocabulary lists for common English words. | 3,15 | 78,75 |
| Students need to learn English terms related to Banggai Laut culture. | 3,25 | 81,25 |
| Students want texts about local folktales, myths, and traditions. | 3,15 | 78,75 |
| Students prefer reading exercises with comprehension questions. | 3,10 | 77,5 |

Among the 20 students surveyed in the two vocational schools, the reported learning needs extend beyond the description of reading difficulties and point to specific pedagogical implications. The strong demand for vocabulary lists and localized terminology support indicates that students perceive structured linguistic scaffolding as essential for comprehension development. This pattern suggests that learning expectations are shaped not only by existing gaps but also by students' awareness of the types of support that facilitate understanding.

## Students' Preferences in Learning English Reading (Wants and Learning Needs)

Beyond instructional needs, students' preferences provide insight into affective and contextual factors that may support or reinforce learning engagement.

**Table 3** Students' Response on Want Analysis

| Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Students like texts about regional folktales or history. | 3,20 | 80 |
| Students prefer texts with illustrations or pictures. | 3,15 | 78,75 |
| Students enjoy reading about local nature, tourism, and cultural values. | 3,05 | 76,25 |
| Students are interested in topics about coastal and fishing traditions. | 3,05 | 76,25 |

The want analysis among the 20 students in these two vocational schools indicates a strong preference for visually supported and culturally familiar reading materials. Interest in folktales, local history, tourism, and coastal traditions suggests that topic familiarity functions as an affective entry point rather than merely a thematic choice. This pattern appears to align with previously identified lacks in contextual comprehension, indicating that students' wants may reinforce rather than contradict their learning needs.

To further understand how these needs may be addressed in classroom practice, the following analysis explores students' preferred learning conditions, including input, teacher roles, procedures, and learning settings.

**Table 4** Input Analysis

| Statement by item | Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| The ways students prefer to improve my reading skills | Doing independent reading | 3,25 | 81,25 |
| | Discussing texts with peers or teachers | 3,25 | 81,25 |
| Ways Students like learning key vocabulary before reading. | Learning local wisdom vocabulary before reading. | 3,20 | 80 |
| | Discussing the meaning of local wisdom vocabulary with peers or teachers. | 3,20 | 80 |

The input analysis among the 20 students in the two vocational schools indicates a preference for structured preparation prior to reading. The combination of independent reading, peer discussion, and pre-teaching of key vocabulary particularly local wisdom terms suggests that students perceive comprehension as requiring guided activation rather than spontaneous decoding. This pattern appears to correspond with earlier identified lacks in vocabulary and contextual understanding, indicating that preparatory input functions as a compensatory strategy. Rather than representing mere preference, these responses reflect a perceived need for cognitive scaffolding.

**Table 5** Teacher Role Analysis

| Statement by item | Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| The ways students prefer to receive guidance from the teacher | Receiving direct explanations from the teacher before reading the text. | 3,55 | 88,75 |

The teacher role analysis among the 20 students indicates a strong preference for direct explanation before reading. This pattern appears to correspond with previously identified linguistic and contextual lacks, suggesting that teacher guidance functions as compensatory scaffolding rather than mere instructional preference. While such reliance reflects the need for structured support when encountering complex language, it may also indicate limited confidence in independent strategy use within this specific setting.

These tendencies should not be interpreted solely as stable learner preferences but may also reflect prior instructional experiences and the limited exposure to independent reading strategies within this specific context.

**Table 6** Procedure Analysis

| Statement by item | Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ways students prefer to learn skimming and scanning methods | Getting direct examples from the teacher on how to use this method. | 3,30 | 82,5 |
| Ways students prefer to use effective reading strategies | Summarizing after reading a text. | 3,10 | 77,5 |

| Ways students prefer to find keywords in a text | Highlighting important words in the text while reading. | 3,40 | 85 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ways that help students connect information between paragraphs in a text | Reading the entire text first before analyzing it. | 3,45 | 86,25 |

The procedure analysis indicates that most of the 20 students in these two vocational schools favour explicit modelling of reading strategies, including skimming, scanning, summarizing, and identifying key words. This pattern suggests that strategic processing is not yet fully internalized, requiring structured guidance for effective comprehension. The preference for reading the entire text before analysing details also reflects a need for holistic understanding rather than fragmented decoding.

**Table 7** Setting Analysis

| Statement by item | Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| The ways students prefer to understand text content through discussion or Q&A | Discussing in small groups to talk about the text content. | 3,40 | 85 |

The setting analysis indicates that most of the 20 students preferred discussing texts in small groups to explore content collaboratively. This pattern suggests that comprehension is experienced as a socially mediated process rather than an entirely individual task. Such reliance on peer discussion may function as shared scaffolding, particularly when linguistic confidence is limited. Aqdas (2025) explains that collaborative interaction can facilitate schema activation and support collective meaning-making in reading activities.

**Table 8** Student role

| Statement by item | Categories of response | Mean | (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| The reading activities students enjoy the most | Reading the text independently before discussing it with peers or the teacher. | 3,20 | 80 |
| | Making brief notes on key points before class discussions. | 3,20 | 80 |

Among the 20 students surveyed, many reported preferring to read independently before class discussions and prepare brief notes in advance. This pattern may indicate a tendency toward structured individual preparation prior to collaborative engagement, rather than purely passive participation. Such behaviour suggests that initial meaning construction occurs individually before being negotiated socially.

## 3.1 Discussion

The findings from the two vocational schools in Banggai Laut indicated that students' reading difficulties are closely related to linguistic complexity and contextual distance. Students struggle not only with unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures, but also with the inability to connect textual content with their prior knowledge and

lived experiences. From the perspective of schema theory, comprehension becomes constrained when relevant background knowledge is not activated. Abbas (2021) and Saori (2022) explain that learners often encounter difficulty identifying main ideas and interpreting meaning when texts present unfamiliar topics and grammatical patterns disconnected from their experiential world. In this sense, linguistic difficulty and contextual unfamiliarity operate simultaneously as cognitive barriers.

Within this framework, local wisdom should not be reduced to a thematic addition; rather, it can function as a schema activator. Familiar elements such as folktales, coastal traditions, and local social practices appear to facilitate connections between new English input and students' existing knowledge structures. Aqdas (2025) argues that familiar cultural cues support comprehension by enabling learners to anchor new information in previously constructed knowledge networks. Conceptually, integrating local wisdom into reading materials can therefore serve as a cognitive bridge between language learning and contextual understanding.

However, the relationship between cultural familiarity and comprehension is not unproblematic. Bensalah (2022) cautions that cultural integration does not automatically ensure deeper cognitive processing unless accompanied by structured pedagogical mediation. Cultural proximity may increase engagement, but without guided schema activation and strategy instruction, its cognitive benefits may remain limited. Similarly, Hicham et al. (2025) demonstrate that culture-based instruction can produce uneven outcomes across language skills, depending heavily on instructional design and classroom implementation. These perspectives suggest that local wisdom should not be viewed as inherently transformative, but as a contextual resource whose impact depends on systematic scaffolding and strategic integration.

The need for vocabulary support and cultural familiarity further indicates that students require materials capable of reducing cognitive load while strengthening meaning construction. Local vocabulary lists and culturally embedded terms may function as meaning-making scaffolds that support interpretation. Nurlidiawati and Ramadayanti (2021) describe culturally responsive pedagogy as an approach that connects learning with students' sociocultural realities, potentially strengthening both comprehension and character formation. Bacia (2024) likewise emphasizes that instructional materials become more meaningful when they resonate with learners' context. Nevertheless, the insights from Bensalah (2022) and Hicham et al. (2025) remind us that contextual relevance alone is insufficient without explicit instructional structuring.

Students' preferences for visuals, discussion, and collaborative learning also reposition reading as a socially mediated process rather than a purely individual decoding activity. Visual representations can clarify meaning, while discussion allows learners to negotiate interpretation and co-construct understanding. Marhamah (2021), Eka (2023), and Triani (2022) report that culturally familiar and visually supported materials enhance motivation and comprehension, and Susanti et al. (2024) highlight how interactive materials foster participation and learning independence. At the same time, collaborative engagement must be supported by tasks that promote analytical depth; otherwise, interaction may remain surface-level (Towairesh, 2021).

The strong preference for teacher explanation prior to reading requires careful and critical interpretation. On one level, it reflects the importance of guided scaffolding in contexts where students have limited exposure to English. Al Hakim (2025) and Khan and Iqbal (2025) explain that teacher-led preparation can help activate background knowledge and clarify expectations before students encounter complex texts. Yet, this reliance may also signal underdeveloped self-regulated reading strategies or the persistence of teacher-centered learning traditions. Ibrahim (2014) and Murti (2023) stress the importance of explicit modelling of reading strategies to foster independence.

If teacher explanation consistently precedes student engagement, opportunities for inferencing, monitoring comprehension, and strategic problem-solving may be constrained. Moreover, such dependence may reflect earlier material designs that prioritized transmission of meaning over strategy development. Thus, the preference for teacher explanation should be interpreted both as evidence of contextual need and as an indication that gradual pedagogical shifts toward learner autonomy are necessary.

The students' willingness to read independently before discussion and prepare notes suggests that autonomy is not absent, but potentially under-supported. Rahman et al. (2024) argue that culturally relevant materials can encourage personal engagement prior to collaborative negotiation of meaning. In vocational education settings, where learning is oriented toward functional literacy, practical understanding, and time efficiency, such structured autonomy becomes particularly important. Unlike general academic EFL contexts that may emphasize theoretical language mastery, vocational learners often require reading skills that are immediately applicable to workplace communication, technical instructions, and situational problem-solving (Vuong et al., 2025). Limited instructional time further intensifies the need for materials that are concise, contextually meaningful, and strategically scaffolded. Reading materials in vocational contexts must therefore balance clarity, contextual relevance, and strategy training to support applied literacy skills aligned with workplace realities. In this sense, integrating local wisdom is not only culturally responsive, but also pedagogically aligned with vocational learners' functional and contextual learning orientation (Tuluki et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings contribute to conceptual discussions on schema activation, culturally responsive pedagogy, and needs-based material design by positioning local wisdom not merely as content, but as a potential cognitive and affective scaffold. At the same time, the inclusion of contrasting perspectives underscores that cultural integration is not automatically effective. Its value depends on pedagogical mediation, strategic scaffolding, and gradual development of learner autonomy. In this specific vocational context in Banggai Laut, local wisdom appears to offer a meaningful foundation for contextualized material development, while simultaneously revealing areas where instructional refinement remains necessary. This perspective suggests that local wisdom functions not merely as reading content but as a pedagogical resource that supports comprehension when integrated with appropriate instructional strategies.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students in two vocational schools in Banggai Laut demonstrate specific needs regarding English reading materials that integrate local wisdom. The findings highlight several important points. First, students experience linguistic challenges when reading English texts, particularly those containing complex sentence structures and unfamiliar vocabulary. Second, students encounter contextual difficulties when reading texts that are distant from their daily experiences and cultural environment. Third, students' express interest in reading materials that incorporate local folktales, traditions, and cultural practices, indicating the relevance of culturally familiar content within this vocational context.

These findings suggest that the development of English reading materials in this setting should consider both students' language proficiency and their cultural background. However, this study does not examine the effectiveness of integrating local wisdom, nor does it measure its impact on students' learning outcomes. Instead, it provides a needs-based foundation that may inform the design of contextually appropriate materials for similar vocational contexts. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The data were collected from a relatively small number of

students using a single questionnaire instrument within a specific local setting. Therefore, the findings are context-bound and not intended for generalization to other schools or regions. Future research may build upon these identified needs by developing and further investigating reading materials aligned with students' linguistic and cultural characteristics in comparable vocational settings. Further studies may also employ mixed-method to gain deeper insights into how culturally grounded materials influence reading processes and learning experiences over time.

## Acknowledgements

## Authors' Contributions

Dwi Sri Julianie Sukun was responsible for the research conception, study design, instrument development, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript writing. Hasanuddin Fatsah and Moh. Syahrun Ibrahim contributed by supervising the refinement of the research design, providing methodological guidance, and conducting critical revisions of the manuscript. Sartin T. Miolo, Adriansyah Abu Katili, and Muziatun Mukadji contributed to academic review and provided constructive feedback on the manuscript.

## AI Generative Statement

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only for language editing and clarity improvement during the manuscript preparation. All ideas, data analysis, and interpretations are the authors' original work, and the authors take full responsibility for the content of the article.

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