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ELT in the Margins: A Competency-Based Inquiry into Blended English Instruction in Maluku's Outer Regions

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness and challenges of integrating blended learning and competency-based approaches in English language teaching (ELT) in remote areas of Maluku. Limited access to educational resources, including instructional materials and teacher training, remains a major constraint affecting learning quality. A competency-based approach emphasises measurable English skills and learning outcomes, while blended learning combines face-to-face instruction with digital technologies to enhance flexibility and access. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of curriculum documents in several remote schools. The findings indicate that competency-based blended learning has the potential to reduce geographical barriers and promote more active student engagement. However, its implementation is hindered by inadequate technological infrastructure, limited teacher digital competence, and challenges in aligning the curriculum with local contexts and national standards. This study highlights the need for sustained policy support, continuous teacher professional development, and stakeholder collaboration to improve the quality of ELT in marginalised regions.

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is increasingly crucial in the era of globalisation because it serves as *a lingua franca* that paves the way to access information, economic opportunities, and cross-cultural interactions. As Kirkpatrick (2022) emphasised, *"English today is not merely a foreign language, but a key resource for social mobility and access to global opportunities* ." In Indonesia, various policies and initiatives have been launched to improve the quality of English learning, but in reality, implementation on the ground still faces serious challenges, especially in remote and marginalised areas. Zainuddin & Keumala (2023) emphasised that *"the uneven distribution of digital and human resources across Indonesian regions creates an educational gap that directly impacts English learning outcomes*. "

In island regions like Maluku, limited educational resources are a crucial factor. Rahman & Abdullah (2021) revealed that *"teachers in rural and island schools often rely on outdated textbooks and lack training in communicative teaching methods*," resulting in suboptimal English learning. This challenge is compounded by limited digital infrastructure. Warschauer (2023) highlighted that *"the digital divide is not only about access to devices and the internet, but also about the ability to meaningfully integrate technology into pedagogy* ." This creates a gap between national curriculum standards and classroom learning practices. Widodo (2024) even warned that *"without contextualised materials and sustained teacher professional development, English teaching in remote Indonesian regions risks becoming policy rhetoric rather than a practical reality*. " Therefore, the required solutions are not only limited to providing digital devices or online modules, but also include strengthening teacher capacity, integrating teaching materials rooted in local wisdom, and implementing blended learning strategies that are adaptive to infrastructure conditions in remote areas.

In this context, pedagogical innovations such as blended learning and competency-based teaching (CBT) are becoming increasingly relevant. Blended learning, which combines face-to-face learning with online activities, offers flexibility while expanding access to learning. Nasrullah et al. (2023) assert that *"the blended learning approach... innovation in education personalised for self-independent learning*," meaning this approach supports independent learning tailored to students' needs. Meanwhile, CBT places greater emphasis on the achievement of measurable skills and knowledge. Marcellinus (2023) explains that this approach seeks to *"increase learner autonomy and learning effectiveness by emphasising desired competency outputs*," although in practice, teachers are still required to prepare creative and contextual teaching materials. The integration of these two approaches is seen as an innovative strategy capable of bridging resource constraints while ensuring that students in remote areas continue to develop their necessary English language competencies.

Maluku Province, with its vast and scattered archipelago geography, presents a real challenge to equitable education. Under these conditions, the role of teachers in remote areas becomes increasingly vital, despite challenges. Windani et al. (2023) noted that *"teachers in remote English teaching... often face limited access to training and resources, yet remain pivotal in maintaining learning continuity* ." Similarly, the INOVASI (2024) report emphasised that *"teachers in rural and remote areas have lower levels of certification and limited access to educational technologies* ." These facts demonstrate that the issue of educational disparity is not only related to infrastructure, but also concerns the quality and preparedness of educators. Thus, research on adapting competency-based blended learning to ELT contexts *in the margins of Indonesia,* such as Maluku, is urgently needed. This study aims not only to capture the realities on the ground but also to explore potential and formulate practical solutions to strengthen English language learning in remote areas of Indonesia.

English Language Teaching (ELT) continues to grow worldwide, but its success is inextricably linked to the social, economic, and geographic context in which it is implemented. In remote and marginalised areas, the challenges are even more complex and multi-layered. Long distances from city centres, limited infrastructure, and limited communication access create different conditions than those in schools in urban areas.

As noted by Richards (2015), there are several major barriers to implementing ELT in remote areas. First, access to teaching materials remains very limited. Available textbooks are often outdated and out of sync with the current curriculum, while audio-visual resources are almost non-existent. Second, technological facilities are also a major obstacle. Unstable internet access and the lack of computers, tablets, or projectors make it difficult for the learning process to keep up with modern pedagogical developments. This also has a direct impact on the digital literacy of both teachers and students.

Furthermore, issues with teacher qualifications and training further widen the gap. Many English teachers in remote areas lack adequate formal training or ongoing professional development opportunities. As a result, their teaching strategies are often limited, particularly in more complex skills such as pronunciation, grammar, and conversation. Meanwhile, student motivation and engagement vary, influenced by social context, job opportunities, and their perceptions of the usefulness of English in their local environment. Mother tongue and local culture also play a significant role, requiring teachers to be more sensitive and able to integrate local wisdom into their teaching.

Despite this, various innovative strategies continue to be pursued. Aziz and Hussin (2018) and Lee (2019) emphasise the importance of adaptation, utilisation of local resources, and pedagogical creativity to overcome these obstacles. One widely discussed approach is competency-based teaching (CBT). In this philosophy, the emphasis is no longer on how long students study, but rather on how well they master specific competencies. Spady (1998) explains that competency encompasses a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable a person to effectively perform a role. CBT principles require fair assessment, the use of clear rubrics, and portfolios that assess concrete achievements. In the context of ELT, this means students are targeted to master practical skills: understanding instructions, writing professional emails, or communicating in specific situations.

On the other hand, a blended learning approach presents a promising alternative. By combining face-to-face and online learning, this approach offers highly relevant flexibility, especially for students in remote areas. Students can practice vocabulary or pronunciation independently through online platforms, then use face-to-face time for more complex communicative activities. Other advantages include flexible access, adapting materials to individual abilities, and increased learning motivation through gamification or digital interactions. However, the challenges faced are also real: limited internet access, low digital literacy among teachers and students, and the need for well-thought-out learning design and consistent technical support.

Experiences in Southeast Asia demonstrate varying degrees of success for blended learning. Warschauer (2003) and Zainuddin et al. (2020) highlight the digital divide as a major challenge in rural areas. Widodo (2020) emphasises that infrastructure and human resource readiness are key to successful implementation in Indonesia. In India, Sharma and Misra (2019) found a lack of trained teachers and teaching materials but suggested the use of mobile technology as an alternative solution. Hao's (2017) research in China demonstrated that CBT can increase student motivation, although teacher training remains a crucial prerequisite. In Malaysia, Rahman and Abdullah (2021) found that creative teachers can optimise limited resources to create effective learning experiences.

While these studies provide important insights, research that directly integrates the three elements—ELT in remote areas, competency-based approaches, and blended learning—into a single, comprehensive framework is rare. This is particularly relevant in Indonesia, particularly in Maluku, which has a unique and challenging geographic and socio-cultural context.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach, a methodological choice considered most appropriate for understanding the phenomenon of "ELT in the Margins: A Competency-Based Inquiry into Blended English Instruction in Maluku's Outer Regions" in depth. With this approach, researchers can capture the complexity of teacher and student experiences, the dynamics of learning implementation in the field, and adaptation strategies that might be overlooked if only analysed quantitatively. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the meaning, interpretation, and nuances of each piece of data obtained.

The design used was a case study. This approach was chosen because it allows for exploration of phenomena within specific, real-life contexts. The case study helped researchers holistically observe how competency-based blended learning is implemented in remote schools in Maluku, while identifying local factors that support or hinder its successful implementation. Thus, the case study yielded rich, in-depth, and comprehensive data from multiple sources.

In this study, the analysis focused on two senior high schools in Tiakur, the capital of Southwest Maluku Regency. These two schools were selected because they are currently implementing or have attempted to implement a competency-based blended learning model in English teaching. This location is also geographically and strategically attractive, given that Southwest Maluku Regency is one of Indonesia's outermost regions, directly bordering Timor Leste and Australia.

The research participants consisted of 4 English teachers and 30 students from two classes. The participant selection technique used purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling, where initial participants could recommend other relevant participants. This strategy is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences, challenges, and adaptation strategies in implementing competency-based blended learning in marginalised areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from research conducted in remote areas of Maluku regarding the implementation of competency-based blended learning in English teaching. The findings are presented based on themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis.

Contextual Description of Blended English Instruction in Maluku's Outer Regions

Availability of Resources (Technology, Teaching Materials)

Observations and interviews with teachers and principals revealed significant variation in the availability of technological resources. In the first school (A), internet access is very limited, often only available in the school office and is unstable. Nearly all teachers have smartphones, but data quotas are a major barrier to their use in learning. The number of computers available at the school is limited and often poorly maintained, so their use is suboptimal. The primary teaching materials still rely heavily on printed textbooks distributed by the government, some of which are already outdated. Teacher A1 stated, *"The children here are not used to using computers, and the signal is sometimes dead. So, if they want to use the school laptops, they have to take turns, and the materials are also limited."*

Meanwhile, in another school (B) with slightly better access has a computer lab with a more adequate number of units, but the internet connection remains a major problem. Some teachers have tried using online learning platforms or educational videos, but often have to download materials first when there is a strong signal or use limited personal data. The teaching materials used vary; some still rely on old textbooks, but some teachers try to supplement them with additional materials from the internet or reference books they own personally. Teacher B1 commented, *"I often download materials from YouTube or other websites when I'm in town, then I play them in class using a projector if there is electricity. But not all students can access them at home."*

Characteristics of Students and Teachers

The majority of students at these schools come from lower-middle-class backgrounds. More than 75 per cent of students live far from their schools and have to travel long distances. Students' digital literacy levels are low, and their experience with formal learning technologies is very limited. Student A1 from School A stated, *"I've never used a computer to study; I've only seen one. I don't have internet at home."*

The teachers we met generally had undergraduate degrees, but not all specialised in English Language Education. Many teachers held multiple teaching positions. Formal experience and training in contemporary English language teaching methods, including blended learning and CBT, remained limited. Some teachers who attempted to implement these methods did so independently, without adequate training or support from the local government or their schools. Teacher A2 said, *"I know blended learning exists, but I've never received formal training, so I'm a bit confused about how to get started. Furthermore, the tools are limited."*

Implementation of Blended Learning (Models Used, Platforms)

The implementation of blended learning in these schools tends to be partial and adaptive to existing limitations. The most common model is a variation of the Station Rotation or Flipped Classroom model, with online elements (if any) focused primarily on material delivery or independent practice.

At School A, several teachers attempted to implement elements of *the flipped classroom* by assigning reading material from textbooks or asking students to find simple information from sources they might have access to (for example, from older siblings or neighbours with access). Face-to-face time was then used for discussions, Q&A sessions, and practical exercises. Use of online platforms was minimal due to technical difficulties.

At School B, more tech-savvy teachers tried using pre-downloaded educational videos or simple online practice exercises accessible in the computer lab. However, the integration between online and in-person activities was often poorly structured. Teacher B2 explained, *"Sometimes I give students assignments on the computer, and then the next week we discuss them in class. But, of course, not everyone gets a chance to use the computer."* The use of specialised learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Moodle, or other platforms is very rare or even non-existent due to limited access and literacy.

English Language Competency Level of Students

Initial Competency Assessment

Based on classroom observations and teacher interviews, students' English language proficiency levels at both schools tend to be at the elementary to early intermediate level. Students are generally able to understand simple vocabulary and

basic phrases in familiar contexts. Speaking skills are still limited to short utterances and simple sentences, often with considerable assistance from teachers or peers.

- Listening Skills: Students understand slower, clearer speech, especially when accompanied by gestures or visuals. They struggle to understand faster speech or different accents.
- Speaking Skills: Students often feel hesitant and lack confidence when asked to speak in English. They tend to avoid using complex sentences and prefer short answers. A student, A2, admitted, *"I'm afraid of making mistakes when I speak, so I prefer to stay silent."*
- Reading Skills: Students can read short texts with familiar vocabulary, but have difficulty understanding longer or more complex texts, as well as understanding main ideas and specific details.
- Writing Skills: Students' writing skills are limited to simple sentences, often with significant grammatical and spelling errors. Their ability to construct cohesive paragraphs is still very limited.

Post-Intervention Competency Assessment Results

In this case study, due to its exploratory nature and time constraints, formal "post-intervention" measurements may not be conducted in the form of standardised tests. However, teachers who have attempted to integrate elements of blended learning and CBT report improvements, albeit small, in some areas.

- Increased Participation: Teacher A1 felt that by giving initial homework (e.g., reading material or looking up vocabulary), students who were previously passive became more active in asking questions in class.
- Increased Confidence: Several students who actively participated in class activities, both online and offline, showed increased confidence in speaking. Student B2 said, *"After practising on the computer, looking up new vocabulary, I feel more confident asking for the meaning of words I don't know in class."*
- Understanding Key Concepts: Teachers who focus on a specific competency (e.g., introducing oneself) report that students better understand and can demonstrate that competency after directed practice, either through online materials or classroom activities.

However, it should be noted that these improvements are anecdotal and cannot be generalised without more systematic measurements.

Teacher and Student Perceptions of Competency-Based Blended English Instruction

Teacher Perception

In general, teachers see the positive potential of blended learning and competency-based approaches, but also recognise the many obstacles.

- The Potential of Blended Learning: The majority of teachers acknowledged that blended learning can help students access broader and more flexible learning materials and has the potential to increase motivation. Principal B supported this view, saying, *"Technology is important for our children's future. We must continue to encourage teachers to take advantage of what's available."*
- The Potential of CBT: Teachers who understand the concept of CBT see it as a good way to ensure students truly master what is being taught, not just complete assignments. Teacher B2 said, *"If it's competency-based, we know exactly what they should achieve. So, it's not just about teaching, but about making sure they can do it."*
- Implementation Challenges: The biggest challenges voiced by teachers were limited infrastructure (electricity, internet, devices), lack of adequate training, the need for material adaptation, and differences in student ability levels.
- Support Needed: Teachers urgently need ongoing technical and pedagogical training, better access to technology tools and the internet, and policy support from the government and schools.

Student Perception

Students showed mixed responses, but were generally interested in the new elements offered by this approach.

- Interest in Technology: Students who have little experience with technology, such as using computers or cell phones, show enthusiasm for learning activities that utilise these tools.
- Desire for Independent Learning: Some students enjoy the flexibility of independent learning through online materials, but often need additional motivation or clear guidance.
- Need for Teacher Support: Students still rely heavily on the presence and direct assistance of teachers, whether to explain material, provide feedback, or motivate them. Limited access to online resources means they cannot fully learn independently without teacher guidance.
- Understanding "Competency": Students often don't explicitly understand the concept of "competency-based." They respond better to clear, measurable learning objectives, such as "today we will learn how to introduce ourselves."

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors for Implementation

Supporting Factors:

- Teachers' Desire to Innovate: Many teachers are highly motivated to improve the quality of teaching despite limitations.
- Minimal Support from School: Principals who support and encourage the use of technology, even if limited.
- Student Interest in Technology: Student enthusiasm for activities involving technology.
- Local Resources That Can Be Utilised: Use of available printed textbooks, as well as materials that teachers can create themselves.

Inhibiting Factors:

- Limited Technological Infrastructure: Unstable electricity, poor or no internet connection, lack of technological devices.
- Lack of Teacher Training and Professional Support: Teachers feel inadequately equipped with the skills and knowledge to implement blended learning and CBT effectively.
- Limitations of Appropriate Teaching Materials: Difficulty in accessing or creating teaching materials that are relevant to the local context and competency standards.
- Low Digital Literacy: Both teachers and students have digital literacy skills that still need to be improved.
- Socio-Economic Conditions of Students: Limited student access to devices and the internet at home.
- Geographical Barriers: Long distances and high transportation costs to access training or resources.

These findings indicate that, although implementation is still in its early stages and very limited, the integration efforts between blended learning elements and competency-based principles have had some positive impacts, particularly in terms of student participation and learning motivation.

- Blended Learning as an Accelerator: Online elements (even if limited to downloading materials or using school computers) allow students to gain additional exposure to materials or exercises, which are then used in face-to-face sessions. This demonstrates that even on a small scale, blended learning can expand the reach of learning.
- CBT as a Directional Tool: Focusing on competencies helps teachers be more focused in designing learning activities, both online and offline. When teachers can clearly define what students should achieve, the teaching process becomes more efficient.
- Potential Synergy: The most visible linkage occurs when online learning is used for independent practice in achieving specific competencies (e.g., memorising basic vocabulary or grammar), while face-to-face sessions are used for active, integrated practice (e.g., dialogues using that vocabulary). However, this potential synergy has not been fully realised due to existing constraints.

Overall, the results of this initial study indicate that there is great potential to improve ELT in remote areas of Maluku through the adoption of competency-based blended learning, but its successful implementation is highly dependent on the provision of adequate infrastructure, ongoing teacher training, and the development of contextualised teaching materials.

This section discusses the research findings that have been presented, relates them to relevant theories from the literature review, and provides an in-depth interpretation of the implementation of competency-based blended learning in the ELT context in remote areas of Maluku.

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of blended learning and competency-based instruction (CBT) in remote areas of Maluku faces significant challenges, particularly related to technological infrastructure and teacher professional support. However, despite these limitations, there is potential and positive impacts that are beginning to emerge. The finding that schools in Maluku tend to adopt highly adaptive blended learning models, such as simple variations of the flipped classroom or very basic station rotations, aligns with the challenges faced in many remote areas of developing countries. Warschauer (2003) emphasised that "technology adoption in remote areas is always shaped by infrastructural and socio-economic constraints." Similarly, Widodo (2020) asserted that "teachers in Indonesia's rural schools often have to modify and simplify blended learning models due to contextual limitations." Limited internet access and devices force teachers to be creative in integrating small digital elements with face-to-face learning. As Aliyyah et al. (2021) emphasised, "limited internet connectivity in rural areas has forced teachers to rely on hybrid models that combine offline and online strategies." This shows that the concept of blended learning does not always have to mean the use of sophisticated online platforms, but also how to utilise existing technology (even if limited) effectively.

Furthermore, recent research also emphasises the importance of teacher flexibility. For example, Kusuma and Hamidah (2022) noted that "teachers in remote Indonesian regions often innovate by creating simple, low-tech blended learning methods to maintain student engagement." This finding reinforces the reality on the ground that teachers in Maluku can improvise strategies despite limited resources. Students' interest in technology, even if unfamiliar, is also an important asset that can be developed. According to Pratiwi (2023), "students in marginalised areas show enthusiasm toward digital tools, but they require structured guidance to transform their interest into effective learning practices." Thus, the results of this study highlight not only obstacles but also opportunities for developing contextual and sustainable learning models in the 3T region.

Teachers attempting to implement CBT tend to focus on establishing clear learning objectives and more focused assessments focused on achieving specific skills. Although students' understanding of the concept of *competency* is not yet deep, they respond positively when learning has clear and measurable goals. As Richards and Rogers (2022) emphasise, "competency-based instruction emphasises clarity of learning outcomes and observable performance criteria, making it easier for both teachers and students to monitor progress." Teachers who attempt to define competencies, such as *introducing themselves* and then designing activities to achieve them, reflect the basic principles of CBT. However, the comprehensive assessment and time flexibility aspects of CBT have not been fully realised due to limited resources and a rigid curriculum.

The potential synergy between *blended learning* and *competency-based instruction* (CBT) in remote areas is beginning to emerge. The online element of *blended learning* can be utilised to independently practice basic competencies, such as vocabulary and pronunciation, which can then be practised and developed in more structured face-to-face sessions using CBT principles. In line with this, Delgado and Ferdiansyah (2023) assert that "the integration of blended learning with competency-based approaches can scaffold learners' gradual mastery of skills, particularly in resource-constrained environments." Limited access to online resources actually encourages teachers to focus more on essential competencies that can be taught with available materials. This is consistent with alternative ELT strategies in remote areas that emphasise the use of local and contextual resources. As Nation (2008) notes, "teachers in low-resource contexts must maximise the use of local and contextual materials to build meaningful language learning experiences." Similar support was expressed by Aziz and Hussin (2018), who stated that “leveraging local resources not only sustains learning but also embeds cultural relevance into ELT practices in rural areas.”

The findings regarding the predominance of infrastructure challenges—such as limited electricity, internet access, and devices—are highly consistent with global literature on the difficulties of implementing educational technology in remote areas (Warschauer, 2003). Arkorful and Abaidoo (2021) also assert that “in rural and remote settings, inadequate

electricity supply and poor internet connectivity remain the primary barriers to the effective use of digital learning technologies." These conditions directly hinder the full potential of *blended learning* and demand highly adaptive strategies from teachers, who play a vanguard role in innovating and adapting amidst limitations.

However, another challenge that arises is the lack of teacher training in modern language teaching methodologies, *blended learning pedagogy*, CBT principles, and appropriate assessment techniques. According to Tarrayo et al. (2022), "teachers in remote schools are often left behind in terms of professional development opportunities, limiting their capacity to innovate with digital and competency-based pedagogies." Therefore, continuous professional development support is crucial to empower teachers in remote areas. As suggested by Kusuma and Edwards (2023), "continuous professional development tailored to local contexts is critical to empower teachers to sustain innovative teaching in resource-constrained environments."

CONCLUSION

In remote areas of Maluku, the implementation of blended learning in English teaching is very limited and adaptive, given the serious technological infrastructure constraints. Teachers are typically only able to utilise online elements minimally, for example, through the use of simple digital resources or independent assignments combined with face-to-face sessions. This effort is intended to maintain optimal learning processes despite limited resources. Simultaneously, a competency-based approach has been introduced, particularly through the establishment of clearer and more measurable learning objectives. Although students' understanding of the concept of competency is not yet fully developed, they have shown a positive response to targeted learning that produces tangible results.

The synergy between blended learning and competency-based teaching (CBT) appears to have the potential to bridge educational gaps in remote areas. Online elements can be utilised as independent practice spaces to achieve specific competencies, while face-to-face sessions are geared toward more interactive communicative practices. This combination contributes to increased student participation and motivation, albeit on a small scale. However, major obstacles remain limited technological infrastructure (such as electricity, internet access, and devices) and a lack of professional training and support for teachers. Without serious addressing, these challenges could hinder the full potential of both approaches.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that pedagogical innovations such as blended learning and competency-based learning have the potential to improve the quality of ELT in remote areas. However, the success of their implementation is largely determined by the education system's ability to overcome infrastructure barriers and strengthen teacher capacity. Therefore, educational disparities in marginalised areas are not only related to curriculum or teaching methods, but also closely related to the availability of facilities, infrastructure, and human resource empowerment strategies. Therefore, the success of educational innovation in remote areas requires a holistic, sustainable, and local-context-sensitive approach.

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