VOCATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO CURRICULUM MISALIGNMENT AND AI-SUPPORTED PEDAGOGY IN TOURISM EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of vocational English teachers addressing curriculum misalignment through technology-supported pedagogical practices in religious tourism education. Although Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka offers greater flexibility and autonomy, its emphasis on General English may not fully address tourism industry communication demands. This study investigated how teachers adapt their instructional practices to address this discrepancy, identify the challenges, and strategies for connecting classroom learning with vocational requirements. Employing a phenomenological design, the study involved two English teachers from tourism-focused vocational schools in East Java. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using Creswell's adaptation of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen phenomenological analysis approach. Four themes emerged: teachers' perceptions of curriculum misalignment in religious tourism education, limited learning resources for tourism-specific English, adaptive pedagogical strategies through collaboration and technology integration, and reflections on institutional support and student motivation. The teachers reported developing their own instructional materials, collaborating with colleagues, and using digital learning platforms such as Quizizz and Kahoot to promote student engagement and support classroom activities. However, the findings do not establish whether AI-specific features were used or evaluated. Challenges included the absence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)-oriented modules, insufficient institutional training, and limited opportunities for advanced technology integration. These findings suggest that greater attention to tourism-related communicative needs, accessible ESP learning resources, and context-sensitive teacher development may help align instruction with industry expectations. Given the small, context-specific sample, these findings offer preliminary insights rather than generalizable conclusions. Further research involving more teachers and institutions is needed to examine the potential contribution of AI-enabled tools to tourism-oriented English education.

Keywords: AI-Supported Pedagogy, Religious Tourism, Vocational English Teacher, Curriculum Mismatch

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INTRODUCTION

In today's global economy, industrial growth led in turn affects the competencies required in an evolving industry. Vocational high schools (VHS), as one source of human resources to work must pay attention and adjust to these developments (Mahmudah & Santosa, 2021). Amid this dynamic environment, VHS feel obliged as the main human resource providers Sari and Mariah (2019), to take their educational programs in line with these shifting demands of industry -to make sure that graduates turn out not only having the required technical competencies whereas could be a life-long learner and professional adaptability. Vocational high school graduates represent a young generation of human resources that ready to develop the capacity and acting competitively in labor market on

global era (Budi, 2020). This is particularly relevant in sectors such as tourism, where English language proficiency has become a basic competency for global communication, and where graduates should be able to interact with customers on an international basis, collaborate with different cultures and meaningfully contribute to service excellence. In this regard, teaching English in vocations is no longer an option but a necessity to prepare vocational graduates to meet the needs of the integrated global labour market reality (Li, 2024).

Nonetheless, many vocational high school English teachers face the persistent challenge of a curriculum that does not fully correspond with the linguistic and communicative needs of the tourism industry. Curriculum transformation, defined as the integration of academic expertise to enhance student achievement, is closely related to the development of teachers' learning (Marsh & Willis, 1995). Nevertheless, it is still unclear whether curriculum designers fully consider the role of teachers who implement these changes in practice (Sukawati et al., 2023). In the context of vocational education, the teaching of English has to be department-specific for students, as the teaching is different from that in senior high schools. This means that both the content and the methodology must be tailored to the students' respective fields of study in order to ensure relevance and effectiveness (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020). Consequently, curriculum–industry misalignment is not merely a matter of content selection; it also concerns teachers' capacity to develop learning experiences that connect language instruction with authentic workplace communication.

English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are the two types of English language learning given in vocational high schools (Risanti et al., 2025). English for General Purpose, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), is the term used to describe the teaching of English at the school level, where students are taught the language's grammatical and structural components in order to pass the test. ESP, on the other hand, concentrates more on learning requirements specific to a given field of study or employment. As stated by Hutchinson and Waters (1987); Sedlackova (2021), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a method of teaching English that bases its methods and content on the needs and motivations of its students. ESP refers to English learning strategies that are tailored to students' needs in order to achieve particular learning objectives or based on their particular field of expertise. One example of this would be English learning for students in vocational education (Fadlia et al., 2020; Juita, 2023). Consequently, reliable materials are crucial for learning or accomplishing a goal. This is the foundation for using need analysis to understand learners' perspectives on language proficiency and English learning (Natsir et al., 2022). Nevertheless, translating ESP principles into classroom practice requires relevant instructional materials, appropriate pedagogical strategies, and sufficient teacher support. When these resources are unavailable, teachers may need to adapt existing materials or develop their own activities to address occupational communication needs.

Based on this foundation, the relevance of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) is crucial in tourism program in vocational high schools (Avcı & Engin-Demir, 2021). Indonesia, with its rich historical sites and cultural heritage, provide a unique opportunity for students to implement their English skills in an authentic context (Ratri et al., 2025) . As many schools are situated around cultural heritage tourist spots that can attract international visitors, which would make English a valuable means for communication and for protecting and promoting the local culture. At the same time, Indonesia is also renowned for some of its religious tourism sites that attract huge numbers of pilgrims and visitors from across the globe (Astuti, 2021). Religious tourism presents a context-specific instructional challenge because communication may involve explaining religious sites, describing cultural traditions, providing visitor guidance, and interacting respectfully with people from different cultural backgrounds.

In this vein, integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into pedagogy offers a fresh opportunity to support teachers in developing more contextualized, interactive, and industry-oriented learning materials (Lakshmi et al., 2023). AI-powered applications can help teachers in creating adaptive learning environments, producing industry-based authentic content, and providing personalized feedback that enhances communicative skills. For instance, AI platforms might be able to recreate in work-place interactions e.g., conversation with international tourist and produce authentic practice based on students'

vocational fields (Dewantara et al., 2024).

Moreover, AI can assist in needs analysis by analyzing learner data to pinpoint deficiencies and recommend personalized learning paths (Naseer et al., 2024). Consequently, the integration of AI into vocational high school English instruction supports ongoing curriculum reforms, improves the relevance of language education by aligning it more closely with the competencies required in the global workforce (Pedro et al., 2019). However, the availability of AI tools does not automatically ensure meaningful pedagogical integration. Their usefulness depends on teachers' digital competencies, access to appropriate resources, and ability to select tools that address specific learning objectives. Moreover, digital learning platforms and gamified applications should not automatically be classified as AI-based tools unless their AI-specific features are actually used. This distinction is important when examining teachers' technology-supported practices because the use of digital platforms does not necessarily demonstrate the implementation of AI-supported pedagogy.

Up to now, research on tourism education is a growing body of literature that recognizes about the integration of sustainability, digital technologies, and inclusive practices within higher education curricula. Chen et al. (2022) highlighted that teaching and learning methods such as collaborative, interdisciplinary, experience-based, and problem-based models has an imperative contribution in facilitating sustainability in tourism education. Whereas, their study noted that despite the global recognition of sustainable development goals, higher education institutions still tend to teach in traditional curricular formats which typically treat sustainable thinking holistically and systemic thought, leading to graduates having a weak understanding of sustainability in the tourism context. In parallel with sustainability, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in vocational and higher education has surfaced as a transformative force.

Dewantara, Laksana, and Saraswati (2024) conducted a systematic review of AI-based tools in English language learning for vocational students, revealed that AI applications—such as adaptive content delivery, chatbot simulations, and voice recognition—enhance engagement, fluency, and learning motivation. Further, tools like adaptive content delivery, chatbot simulations, and voice recognition have been proven to be extremely effective in aligning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) with industry-relevant communication, promoting student job readiness in tourism, hospitality, and related fields.

In the same line, Rosyanto et al. (2025) used the ADDIE Model to design artificial intelligence (AI) training for vocational teachers, which indicated a significant improvement in teachers' AI literacy and teaching abilities through blended learning on an open-source LMS platform. The findings pointed out that structured instructional design and digital platforms might effectively overcome the skills gap in resource-strained environments. Furthermore, Ejjami, (2024) and George (2023) argue for the need to reformulate higher education curricula and teaching methods to prepare students for a world driven by artificial intelligence (AI). As a counterweight, Druga et al. (2022) analyzed AI teaching resources and found that even though many tools support active learning, they often lack comprehensive guidance for teachers and failure to completely identify the pedagogical dimensions needed to achieve AI literacy. Taken together, these studies provide useful insights into technology-enhanced learning, teacher development, and curriculum adaptation. However, they do not fully explain how vocational English teachers experience and respond to curriculum–industry misalignment in the specific context of religious tourism education. In particular, the relationship between ESP-related instructional needs, teachers' adaptive practices, and their use of digital or AI-enabled tools warrants closer investigation.

Most previous research on artificial intelligence (AI) in tourism and vocational education has prioritized student learning outcomes, curriculum reform, or tool effectiveness. There is little published work on how vocational English teachers experience and address the mismatch between general English curricula and the occupation-specific communication demands of religious tourism. In particular, it remains unclear how teachers adapt ESP-oriented instruction when tourism-specific learning materials and institutional support are limited, and how they use available digital technologies to address these challenges. Furthermore, the relationship between curriculum–industry misalignment,

teachers' adaptive pedagogical practices, and the role of AI-enabled tools has not been sufficiently explored in the context of religious tourism education in vocational high schools. What is not yet understood is the precise nature especially evident in context-specific fields, such as religious tourism, where teachers' voices and adaptive practices have been underexplored. This study reports on the results of research exploring the perspectives of English teachers in vocational high schools in dealing with an inappropriate curriculum through pedagogy supported by artificial intelligence (AI). Particularly, this study sought to unravel some of the issues related to the way teachers adapt their teaching practices to align English for Specific Purposes (ESP) with the communication demands in religious tourism. Accordingly, the guiding research question below:

1. How do English vocational high school teachers navigate mismatched curricula through AI-supported pedagogy in teaching English for religious tourism?
2. What challenges and strategies emerge as teachers adapt their pedagogy to align with the communicative demands of religious tourism?

Literature Review

Curriculum of English Education in Vocational High Schools

Curriculum plays a fundamental role in determining the direction, content, and objectives of educational practices. According to Moore (2006) explained that curriculum is not merely a collection of subjects or instructional materials but rather a socially constructed arrangement of knowledge that reflects particular social, cultural, and economic contexts. In vocational education, curriculum development should be closely connected to the demands of the labor market because vocational schools are primarily established to prepare learners with practical knowledge, technical skills, and professional competencies required in specific occupational fields (Castro et al., 2010). Grynyov et al. (2024) emphasized that an effective vocational curriculum should maintain strong alignment between educational outcomes and workplace expectations to ensure graduates possess competencies that are relevant to current industry developments. Therefore, vocational education requires a curriculum framework that extends beyond general academic knowledge and incorporates authentic workplace practices, professional communication skills, and industry-specific competencies.

Yet in reality, English teaching in vocational high schools can be done from the wrong syllabus. Instead of training students with the professional communicative competences, the curriculum is still dominated by the general linguistic competence (Kaya, 2021). Recent studies have indicated that many vocational English programs still emphasize general language knowledge rather than occupational communication skills, creating a gap between classroom practices and workplace expectations (Widodo, 2016). Even though based on Hymes (1972); Richards and Rodgers (2014) assumed that effective language instruction should prioritize communicative competence over structural accuracy. Recent language education research also emphasizes that vocational language learning should focus on learners' ability to communicate effectively in specific professional contexts rather than only mastering grammatical structures. According to Anthony (2018) ESP-oriented instruction enables learners to acquire language skills that are directly connected to their academic and occupational purposes. Similarly, (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016) highlighted that ESP provides a framework for developing context-sensitive language teaching by considering learners' professional needs and workplace communication practices.

Therefore, vocational English teaching should provide learners with opportunities to practice authentic communication situations related to their professional fields, rather than focusing exclusively on grammatical rules and general language exercises. This disparity presents difficulties for teachers tasked with teaching student the specificities of job-embedded professional communication, including workplace-specific service encounters within customer-service oriented and quaternary sectors. Based on Janah and Cahyono (2022), vocational English learning should incorporate authentic communication activities that represent real workplace situations because students' future professional success depends not only on language knowledge but also on their ability to use English appropriately in occupational contexts. In tourism-related vocational programs, for example, students are expected to engage in various professional interactions, such as welcoming international visitors, providing tourism information, handling customer

complaints, and explaining cultural or religious destinations. These communication practices require specialized language knowledge that differs significantly from general English proficiency.

Teachers are often left to account for this mismatch. Teachers often attempt to bridge this curricular gap through curriculum adaptation, which aligns with Marsh and Willis (1995) notion of curriculum as both a product and a process. Through curriculum adaptation, teachers actively interpret and reconstruct existing curriculum materials to make them more relevant to students' vocational backgrounds. This process demonstrates that teachers are not merely curriculum users but also curriculum developers who contribute to the contextualization of learning experiences. Without the benefit of curriculum standards that mirror genuine workplace communication, they create their own resources and skill-building exercises. The development of self-produced materials becomes an important strategy for teachers who encounter limitations in available textbooks and instructional resources. These materials often incorporate workplace scenarios, professional vocabulary, and authentic communication tasks that better represent students' future occupational demands.

Moreover, Aziz et al. (2025) study revealed several significant challenges in vocational English teaching. These challenges include a centralized and resistant national curriculum modelled on English for General Purposes (EGP), inadequate facilities for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction, and teachers' limited skills, especially in technical content relevant to vocational fields. These challenges demonstrate that improving vocational English education requires more than teacher commitment alone. Structural support from educational institutions and policymakers is necessary to provide teachers with appropriate curriculum frameworks, teaching resources, and professional development opportunities. Teachers suggested several solutions to these issues, including a more structured ESP curriculum tailored to specific majors, stronger collaboration with industry partners, and hybrid training programs for teacher trainees.

Although laudable, these attempts, are limited by institutional constraints such as standardized examinations, lack of authentic materials, and insufficient professional development opportunities. These limitations may reduce teachers' capacity to implement innovative pedagogical practices because their instructional decisions remain influenced by external assessment systems and curriculum regulations. Recent research has shown that teachers' capacity to implement curriculum reform is strongly influenced by school culture, institutional support, collaboration, and policy contexts. When these conditions are not conducive, teachers often experience constraints in exercising professional agency during curriculum implementation (Wang, 2022). This situation may reduce teachers' flexibility to adapt learning materials according to vocational needs despite the increasing demand for contextualized English instruction. Consequently, teachers often need to negotiate between fulfilling national curriculum expectations and providing learning experiences that are meaningful for students' vocational futures.

Thus, the consequence is that the teachers will have to provide materials, resources, strategies that are outside of this curriculum in order to cover that gap. While these initiatives reflect teachers' creativity and professional responsibility, excessive dependence on individual teacher efforts may not represent a sustainable solution. Long-term improvement requires institutional mechanisms that support ESP-oriented curriculum development, teacher training, and access to relevant learning resources.

While demonstrating the failure of current curricular frameworks, such activities also reveal a lack of teacher agency to adapt content for vocational purposes. Teacher agency plays a crucial role in curriculum implementation because teachers are the main actors who translate curriculum policies into classroom practices. However, teacher agency can only be fully realized when supported by enabling educational environments, adequate resources, and flexible curriculum structures (Priestley et al., 2026). However, teacher agency requires institutional support, professional autonomy, and access to adequate resources to achieve sustainable educational improvement.

Taken together, the literature suggests that curriculum–industry alignment in vocational English education involves more than incorporating occupational content into the curriculum. It also requires teachers to translate industry communication demands into relevant classroom activities while working within existing curricular and institutional

constraints. Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of ESP-oriented instruction and teacher agency (Anthony, 2018; Aziz et al., 2025; Priestley et al., 2026), these approaches may be difficult to implement when teachers lack appropriate materials, professional development, and institutional support. This creates a tension between the expectation that teachers prepare students for specific occupational communication and the practical limitations they encounter in curriculum implementation. Understanding how teachers negotiate this tension is therefore essential to examining curriculum alignment in vocational English education, particularly in specialized fields such as religious tourism.

The Role of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Religious Tourism

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is based on the concept that language instruction should be tailored to learners' professional and situational needs. Based on Hutchinson and Waters (1987)), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is conceptualized as an approach to language learning that is fundamentally driven by learners' needs. It does not determine any specific linguistic characteristics, teaching materials, or methodologies; rather, its distinctiveness lies in its orientation toward the specific purposes for which learners engage with the language. Penjak (2024), highlighted that the use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is very important in improving the learning process, especially in professional fields such as sports, but the limited teaching materials force lecturers and teachers to develop their own materials.

In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), a needs analysis serves as the central mechanism for identifying the linguistic competencies most relevant to learners. The outcomes of this process inform the design of the syllabus, ensuring that instructional content is closely aligned with the communicative demands of the learners' academic or professional contexts (Rahman, 2015). For instance, in the context of vocational tourism programs, ESP equips students with the necessary communication skills to welcome visitors, explain cultural heritage, and handle service encounters. These skills directly support employment in tourism-related professions, rendering ESP more effective than general English instruction in preparing students for future careers. ESP's emphasis on contextual learning guarantees that language is taught as a tool for meaningful interaction, not an abstract system.

Furthermore, religious tourism is an important and growing field. ESP is urgently needed there. Religious tourism sites, such as pilgrimage destinations and sacred cultural landmarks, draw large crowds of international visitors who need culturally sensitive communication (Heidari et al., 2018). Nevertheless, standard vocational English curricula rarely include modules specific to this industry. Consequently, teachers must create materials addressing religious vocabulary, intercultural politeness strategies, and communication in service encounters involving spiritual or cultural sensitivity.

Integrating ESP into religious tourism can help vocational education bridge the gap between students' classroom learning and the authentic communicative requirements of their future workplaces. Since religious tourism involves interactions with visitors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, learners need not only English proficiency but also the ability to communicate appropriately within different cultural contexts. According to Basturkmen (2019), ESP instruction should focus on authentic communicative situations and professional discourse to prepare learners for real-world interactions. Moreover, Sari and Wirza (2021) emphasized that tourism-related ESP materials should incorporate local cultural values to enhance learners' professional readiness. Therefore, ESP provides a strategic framework for developing competent and culturally responsive tourism professionals.

Although ESP provides a framework for connecting language instruction with occupational communication needs, its implementation in religious tourism education requires more than adapting general English materials to a tourism context. Teachers need to identify the specific communicative situations, professional vocabulary, and intercultural practices relevant to religious tourism services. However, the availability of appropriate instructional materials and the capacity to contextualize learning activities may constrain the implementation of ESP in vocational schools. This challenge connects ESP directly with

curriculum alignment: when formal curricular content does not sufficiently reflect the communication demands of religious tourism, teachers must interpret existing learning objectives and develop context-sensitive activities. Therefore, examining teachers' experiences is important for understanding how ESP principles are translated into classroom practice under actual educational constraints.

Artificial Intelligence as Supported Pedagogies

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a promising tool for addressing longstanding issues in vocational English education, such as curriculum misalignment and a limited supply of industry-relevant resources. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education can be framed within the theory of Constructivism Vygotsky (1978), which highlights the importance of learner-centered, interactive, and scaffolded experiences.

AI applications, including chatbots, adaptive learning systems, and virtual simulations, enable students to practice authentic interactions in safe, controlled environments. For instance, AI-powered simulations can recreate conversations with international tourists, enabling students to participate in realistic dialogues that resemble workplace interactions (Singh et al., 2025). This experiential learning approach is especially beneficial in vocational contexts, where effective communication is essential for professional competence.

Teachers are also supported by AI through the provision of data-driven insights into learner performance (Strielkowski et al., 2025). Through automated assessments and tailored feedback, AI can help teachers pinpoint students' communication shortcomings and develop targeted interventions. Furthermore, Li (2024),mentioned that AI can generate authentic materials tailored to specific vocational fields, such as religious tourism, reducing the burden on teachers to create these resources independently. However, the successful implementation of AI requires teachers to be digitally literate and to integrate AI into broader pedagogical frameworks (Zhang et al., 2025). If adequate training and institutional support are lacking, the risk is that AI will be underutilized or misapplied. Nevertheless, when supported, AI can supplement existing curricula and align vocational English instruction with real-world industry needs.

Beyond its function as a technological tool, AI can be considered a pedagogical partner that facilitates personalized and context-based learning experiences. In vocational English education, AI enables learners to receive continuous language practice, immediate feedback, and individualized learning support based on their specific needs and proficiency levels. According to (Ouyang et al., 2022), AI-driven learning environments can enhance learner autonomy by providing adaptive support and creating opportunities for self-directed learning. Moreover, Kasneci et al. (2023) emphasized that generative AI tools can assist students in developing communication skills through interactive dialogue, language production, and reflective learning activities. In the context of religious tourism, AI-supported pedagogies can simulate professional communication scenarios, such as guiding international visitors, explaining cultural heritage, and managing cross-cultural interactions. Therefore, the integration of AI with ESP-based instruction has the potential to create more flexible, authentic, and learner-centred vocational English learning environments.

Despite the potential of AI to support contextualized ESP instruction, its pedagogical value should not be assumed solely from the availability or use of digital technology. AI-enabled tools may assist teachers in developing tourism-related materials, simulating workplace interactions, and providing individualized feedback, but their usefulness depends on how they are selected and integrated into learning objectives. Furthermore, limited digital literacy, inadequate training, and insufficient institutional support may prevent teachers from making meaningful use of these capabilities (Strielkowski et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). A critical distinction must also be made between AI-enabled applications and conventional digital learning platforms: using an interactive quiz platform does not necessarily constitute AI-supported pedagogy unless specific AI features are employed. Consequently, the relationship between AI, ESP, and curriculum alignment should be examined through teachers' actual pedagogical practices rather than inferred from technology use alone.

METHODS

Research Design

In this study, researchers applied a phenomenological design. It serving as the foundation for exploring the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Stolz, 2020). Sims (2024) defined phenomenological design as an approach that seeks to uncover how individuals experience and give meaning to a phenomenon. This study situates the phenomena within the lived experiences of English vocational high school teachers, who grapple with curriculum misalignment while drawing on AI-supported pedagogy to shape their instruction in English especially in the religious tourism context. This study focused on religious tourism since it represents a significant and growing segment of Indonesia's tourism industry, requiring English communication skills specific to this context, which were often overlooked in standard vocational curricula. When investigating teachers' experiences in a specific educational context, phenomenology is perceived as an appropriate approach (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Its underlying tenet allows researchers to discover shared meanings and identify similarities among participants' actual experiences (Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

Participants

This study involved two English teachers from vocational high schools in East Java that offer tourism programs. Purposive sampling is appropriate as it facilitated the researcher to select participants with information-rich experiences, whose professional responsibilities and teaching contexts were relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were selected purposively according to their direct experience of teaching English in vocational high schools offering tourism-related programs in East Java. The selection was guided by the relevance of their teaching responsibilities and professional contexts to the study's focus on curriculum alignment, tourism-related English instruction, and technology-supported pedagogy.

In accordance with the phenomenological framework, which prioritizes depth over breadth, Creswell & Poth (2018); Moustakas, (1994), excerpt that the study encompassed a minimal sample size of two participants. This approach enabled the researcher to delve into the research objectives with augmented depth, richness, and detail. Table 2 outlines the background of the participants. Code name was used to safeguard the participants' privacy and ensure confidentiality. The two participants had four and twenty years of teaching experience, respectively, providing accounts from teachers with different lengths of professional experience. The small sample was intended to support an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon rather than statistical representation of vocational English teachers. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted in relation to these participants and their educational contexts, rather than as representative of all vocational high schools.

TABLE 1/Participants' Background Information

Participants	Gender	Year of Experience
T1	Male	4 years
T2	Male	20 years

Data Collection

This study used in-depth, face-to-face interviews as the primary method of collecting data. The researcher scheduled the interviews after taking the participants' availability into account. Each session lasted 30 to 60 minutes, was administered in Indonesian, and took place at the participants' respective locations. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of their narratives. A semi-structured interview guide was formulated on the basis of the research questions, with a focus on three key aspects: (1) teachers' experiences of curriculum misalignment in teaching English for religious tourism, (2) the integration of AI-based tools in pedagogical practices, and (3) the challenges and strategies in adapting English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to the communicative needs of religious tourism.

The use of a semi-structured interview guide, which underwent rigorous development guaranteed flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on issues beyond the guiding questions while continuing to align with the central themes of the study (Kallio et al., 2016). Moreover, conducting the interviews in person allowed the researcher to observe non-verbal cues and seek further elucidation in real time, thereby significantly enriching the depth and reliability of the collected data.

TABLE 2 / Example of Interview Questions

Focus Area	Interview Questions
Curriculum Misalignment	How do you perceive the current vocational English curriculum in relation to the needs of religious tourism?
AI-Supported Pedagogy	What kinds of AI-based tools have you used in your teaching practices?
Challenges and Adaptive Strategies	What strategies do you adopt to align your teaching with the communicative demands of religious tourism?

Data Analysis

The process of coding and analyzing in-depth interviews is critical in qualitative inquiry. The core functionality of the system encompasses the extraction of significant meaning from textual or audio data, the segmentation of data into smaller units, the systematic allocation of codes to these segments, the evaluation of codes for duplication or convergence, and, ultimately, the synthesization of these codes to generate broader thematic constructs (Crowe et al., 2011; M. K. Uddin et al., 2020; M. S. Uddin et al., 2024). In analyzing the data, this study adopted Creswell and Poth (2018) modification of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method, as delineated by Moustakas (1994). The following steps were involved in the process: (1) providing detailed accounts of participants' experiences, (2) implementing horizontalization, (3) grouping significant statements into thematic categories, (4) developing a textural description, (5) constructing a structural description, and (6) creating a composite synthesis that encapsulates the essence of the phenomenon.

In the initial phase, participants' accounts were detailed to ascertain their perspectives on teaching English within tourism programs and their utilization of AI-supported pedagogy. Each narrative was regarded as a crucial entry point into understanding the wider phenomenon. During the process of horizontalization, all significant statements derived from the interview transcripts were given equal weight. This methodological approach assured that early judgments or hierarchical assumptions did not predominate over the voices of the participants. Subsequently, the significant statements were systematically organized into thematic categories that reflected recurrent patterns across participants' narratives. The present study identified four primary themes: (1) perceptions of curriculum misalignment, (2) experiences with AI integration in classroom practices, (3) obstacles in adapting English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to the religious tourism context, and (4) strategies for aligning pedagogy with communicative demands.

Following this, a set of textural descriptions was formulated to illustrate the experiences of the participants, including their encounters with inadequate curricula and their reliance on AI tools for additional materials. Conversely, structural descriptions offered insights into the mechanisms through which these experiences transpired, accentuating contextual factors such as institutional expectations, technological accessibility, and students' responses to AI-supported learning. The final stage of the process yielded a composite synthesis that brought together textural and structural descriptions.

TABLE 3 /Example of Data Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Interview
Perceptions of Curriculum Misalignment in Religious Tourism	Designing materials beyond the official curriculum	"Since the curriculum currently in use is a curriculum *Merdeka*, I usually choose to create the material myself. …
Lack of Resources for Religious Tourism	Limited resources	"We use workbooks because there are no textbooks, and we make them by ourselves …"
Adaptive Strategies: Collaboration and Technology Integration	Technology integration	"… I also use technology, such as Quizizz, Kahoot, etc., for games. …"
Reflections on Institutional Support and Student Motivation	Institutional support	"Yes, for example in the form of inventory support, such as microphones and sound equipment for practice…."

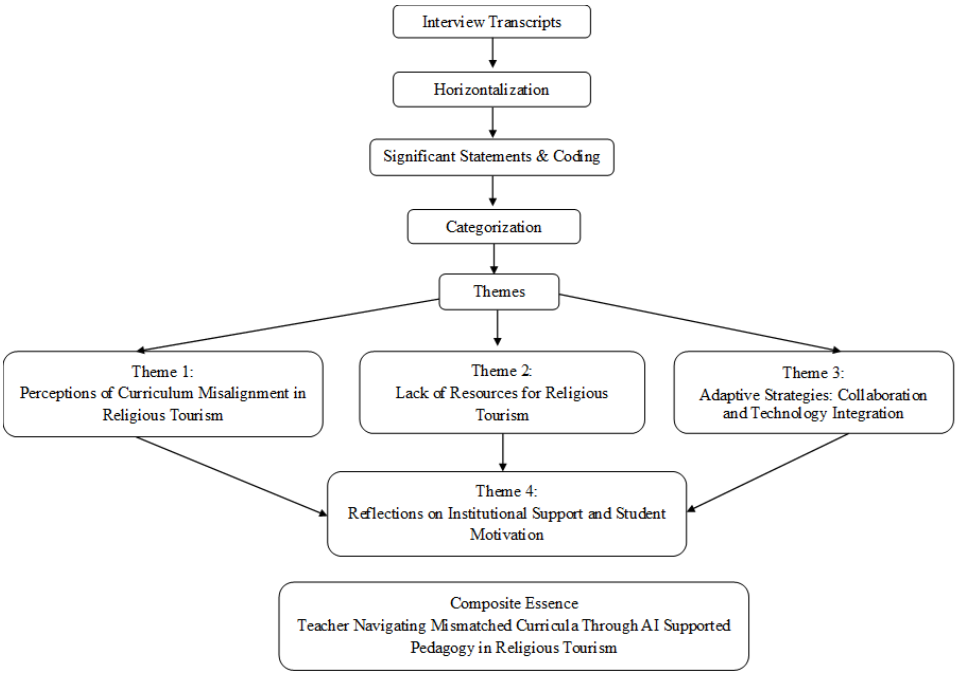


Figure 1. Flowchart of data analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study aimed to explore how vocational English teachers navigate curriculum misalignment through AI-supported pedagogy in teaching English for religious tourism, and to identify the challenges and strategies that emerge in this process. Analysis of the interview transcripts yielded four interrelated themes: (1) Perceptions of Curriculum Misalignment in Religious Tourism, (2) Lack of Resources for Religious Tourism, (3) Adaptive Strategies: Collaboration and Technology Integration, and (4) Reflections on Institutional Support and Student Motivation. Each theme is discussed in detail below, supported by direct participant quotations.

Perceptions of Curriculum Misalignment in Religious Tourism

The analysis uncovered consistent concerns among teachers regarding the misalignment between the current vocational English curriculum and the communicative demands of religious tourism. Although the Kurikulum Merdeka was designed to foster flexibility and autonomy, it mainly emphasized General English Program (EGP) instruction rather than English for Specific Purposes (ESP) designed for vocational fields.

One teacher described the difficulty of aligning the official curriculum with the actualities of religious tourism. He emphasized the importance of modifying and selectively adopted materials. T1 noted that;

> *"Since the curriculum currently in use is an Kurikulum Merdeka, I usually choose to create the material myself. If there are eight materials available in the curriculum, we will sort through them again to decide which ones we will teach, for example, four or five of the eight materials." (T1)*

Similarly, another teacher discussed the consequences of this misalignment on student motivation and achievement. He asserted that the overall direction of the curriculum, combined with the elimination of standardized benchmarks like the national exam, has led to a decrease in students' English proficiency.

> *"Because of the curriculum change, we as English teachers teach general English and prepare students to take the Academic Competency Test (TKA). The absence of benchmarks such as national exams has caused students' English skills to decline dramatically." (T2)*

Teachers further stated that the dominance of general English instruction restricted opportunities for contextual practices related to religious or cultural tourism. One teacher reflected on the broader effect this had on students' abilities.

> *"The reading skill of many students cannot achieve the vocabulary target (reading correctly and understanding the meaning) that is desired in one short text reading." (T2)*

This misalignment was also apparent in the division of teaching responsibilities. At T1's school, for example, English teachers confirmed that they were not directly responsible for teaching tourism-specific practices, such as tour guiding. Instead, this remained the responsibility of subject specialists. However, English teachers tried to adjust their teaching indirectly.

> *"Because there are already teachers or subject teachers to teach that material, but we, the English teachers, also work together with subject teachers. For example, during tests, English teachers are invited to observe the testing activities so that we can find out what English vocabulary is needed." (T1)*

These findings pointed out that, in spite of the fact that the official curriculum establishes broad guidelines, teachers recognize a discrepancy between its objectives and the communicative demands of religious tourism.

Lack of Resources for Religious Tourism

The absence of specialized teaching resources surfaced as a significant challenge in both schools. Teachers consistently noted the lack of government-issued books or instructional packages that addressed the needs of religious or cultural tourism. Alternatively, teachers relied heavily on self-developed worksheets (lembar kerja siswa, or LKS) and collaboratively designed supplementary materials.

One teacher explicitly stated:

"There is no specific book, we design our own materials or open materials." (T2)

This view was echoed by another teacher which the reliance on teacher-generated content at his school was strengthened by collective initiatives in the Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran (MGMP). While collaboration promoted consistency, the focus remained general rather than specific to religious tourism.

"We use LKS, because there are no textbooks, and we make them independently. We design the process of making these independent modules together with other English teachers or the school's MGMP." (T1)

Teachers described how the MGMP tried to create a standardized glossary of essential vocabulary for each department. Nonetheless, this endeavor remained broad and was not adapted specifically for the religious tourism context. As one teacher explained;

"From the English MGMP group to create a glossary of 100 vocabulary words that each major must master. Pre- and post-tests will then be conducted to assess students' understanding of the vocabulary." (T1)

The paucity of authentic resources also extended to opportunities for external exposure. For instance, when queried about inviting outside expertise, such as native speakers, one teacher remarked:

"We have never worked with foreign native speakers to teach the material." (T2)

Teachers' reliance on self-prepared or collectively designed materials is highlighted by these accounts when there are no structured, field-specific resources available. Although these materials provided basic support for English instruction, they did not address the unique communicative needs of religious tourism.

Adaptive Strategies: Collaboration and Technology Integration

Despite the shortcomings of the curriculum design and the dearth of specialized materials, teachers put a variety of adaptive strategies into practice to accommodate the learning requirements of students in tourism programs. Two strategies stood out: collaborating with subject specialists and integrating technology-based tools to support classroom instruction.

Collaboration was seen as crucial for aligning English language teaching with vocational needs. English teachers worked with tourism teachers, especially during assessments and practice activities, to pinpoint relevant vocabulary and communication skills. One participant described this form of professional cooperation.

"We English teachers also work together with department teachers, such as during tests, English teachers are invited to observe the test activities, so we can find out what English vocabulary is needed." (T2)

Aside from collaboration, the integration of digital platforms and interactive tools was another common strategy. Teachers sought to use artificial intelligence to provide vocabulary reinforcement and interactive review exercises. One teacher commented this approach as follows:

"I also use AI technology, such as Quizizz, Kahoot, etc. for games that function as a method of reviewing previous material." (T1)

These adaptive strategies demonstrated teachers' ability to create a more contextualized learning environment for students despite the lack of official support.

Reflections on Institutional Support and Student Motivation

Teachers' reflections highlighted the important roles of institutional provisions and student engagement in shaping English instruction in tourism-related vocational programs. Institutional support was identified in the form of facilities that enabled more authentic practice. Case in point, one teacher shared how the school invested in equipment to improve students' communication skills.

"Institution support includes, for example, inventory support, such as microphones and sound for practice." (T1)

In addition to providing material support, the institution attempted to create alternative learning opportunities due to the absence of large-scale study tours. This was achieved through activities such as Studi Tiru, which allowed students to observe and learn directly from relevant industries. As the teacher stated that;

"One of the alternative ways we take is to continue to hold study tours, so the school provides students with the opportunity to visit industries that are in line with their majors." (T2)

At the same time, teachers acknowledged the significant challenges of maintaining students' motivation to learn English. Another teacher witnessed a substantial decrease in student engagement and dedication, notably when formal benchmarks, such as national exams, were absent.

"Less interested, because in my opinion this is the impact of the independent curriculum, the absence of benchmarks such as national exams, causes students' English skills to decline drastically." (T2)

Teachers also recognized differences in the strengths and preferences of individual students, which further influenced their engagement. T1 said that;

"As far as I have taught, each student's skills are different, for example, some are experts in speaking so they are good at being tour leaders, but there are also those who are experts in compiling or arranging a series of tourism events and are less skilled in speaking, so they focus on developing their skills according to the field they are studying."

The interplay between institutional support measures and the varied levels of student motivation and ability is reflected in the results. While school-provided facilities and programs strengthened vocational English learning, teachers experienced diverse student responses, ranging from declining motivation to differing strengths across skills.

Overall, the four themes demonstrate that curriculum misalignment, limited learning resources, teachers' adaptive strategies, and institutional support are interconnected. Teachers addressed curriculum gaps through self-developed materials, collaboration with vocational subject teachers, and digital learning platforms. However, these efforts remained constrained by limited specialized resources and varying student motivation. Although technology supported classroom activities, the findings did not establish the systematic use of AI-specific features. Thus, the findings primarily illustrate teachers' adaptive practices in addressing curriculum–industry misalignment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the strategies employed by vocational English teachers to address curriculum misalignment in the context of religious tourism. These strategies encompass the utilization of self-developed resources, professional collaboration, and AI-supported pedagogy to address the specific communicative demands of this field. Contrary to its stated commitment to fostering flexibility, what is surprising is that the Kurikulum Merdeka's prevailing emphasis on English proficiency impedes educators from cultivating students' proficiency in vocationally pertinent skills. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that Teachers responded positively to the Merdeka Curriculum, yet its effectiveness depends on adapting instruction to student characteristics (Nahendra, 2024). The absence of structured ESP modules for religious tourism confirmed by Yoto et al. (2024) the pivotal role of industry in synchronizing, implementing, and evaluating the Merdeka curriculum, highlighting the collaborative link between vocational education and workplace demands.

Teachers' dependence on self-developed materials and collaboration within MGMP highlights the ongoing mismatch between curriculum policies and actual classroom practices. This finding is consistent with that of Masbukhin and Sausan (2023) who demonstrated educators' profound commitment to revising the curriculum and ensuring its relevance to students' needs. While these collaborative initiatives promote both creativity and a degree of uniformity, they still fall short in meeting the specific demands of religious tourism especially in areas such as intercultural communication and vocabulary sensitive to religious contexts.

Another possible explanation for this is that the current curriculum frameworks are designed with a generalized orientation, leaving limited space for the contextual adaptation required in religious tourism. This adaptation demands not only linguistic competence but cultural and spiritual sensitivity as well. This finding resonated with Ratri et al. (2025),who highlighted the necessity of embedding local cultural and religious contexts in vocational English teaching to ensure authenticity.

Another important finding is that teachers' efforts to integrate technology in order to enhance student engagement and vocabulary development can be illustrated by the use of digital platforms. Kusuma et al. (2024) showed that preservice teachers in Indonesia utilize ChatGPT for various purposes, such as material development, collaborative strategies, assessment design, and language proficiency improvement, although limitations in information accuracy were still found. The findings indicate that teachers used digital platforms such as Quizizz and Kahoot to support vocabulary review and student engagement. However, the interview evidence did not establish whether AI-specific features were used. Therefore, these practices are more accurately described as technology integration rather than confirmed AI-supported pedagogy. Although AI may offer opportunities to develop contextualized ESP materials for religious tourism, its potential application requires further investigation. While these tools do not yet fully embody the principles of artificial intelligence, their integration is indicative of a congruence with the overarching transition towards digitalization in the domain of vocational education, particularly within the context of religious tourism. In the same vein with Dewantara et al. (2024) revealed that AI-supported applications can foster motivation, fluency, and contextualized practice in ESP learning.

Conversely, the findings also exposed a conspicuous implementation gap: AI is rarely applied to more sophisticated tasks, such as content generation or adaptive learning pathways. It in agreement with those obtained by Druga et al. (2022), a considerable number of AI tools are still deficient in pedagogical guidance and integration strategies, thereby constraining their transformative potential. Consequently, there is considerable potential for AI in this context. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicated that in the lack of institutional training and structured support, teachers particularly those working in the specialized context of religious tourism—were likely to remain dependent on more accessible technological tools rather than fully leveraging the educational capacities of AI.

The most interesting finding is institutional support proved both enabling and limiting in religious tourism education. Facilities like microphones and industry visits reflect schools' efforts to create authentic learning, yet these remain fragmented and fail to address core gaps such as the absence of specialized curricula and textbooks. As Rosyanto et al. (2025) noted AI and digital platforms are only effective when embedded in structured instructional design and systemic support. This study reaffirmed that lasting improvement in religious tourism requires curriculum reform and sustained professional development.

Another key finding concerns student motivation, which teachers observed to decline in the absence of national exams. Although the Kurikulum Merdeka promotes autonomy, the removal of standardized benchmarks appears to lessen students' commitment to English, particularly in religious tourism programs where employability depends on demonstrable communicative competence. This challenge claims that test-free education fosters deeper learning (George, 2023) and instead supports Ejjami (2024) warning that without clear benchmarks, students risk losing direction and undervaluing essential skills.

This study underlined how vocational English teachers in religious tourism manage curriculum gaps through local strategies and limited technology use. It emphasized that sustainable progress requires systemic reform, including tailored ESP modules, institutionalized AI training, and balanced assessments, linking policy, teacher agency, and technology in an integrated framework.

This study highlights how vocational English teachers address curriculum misalignment through material development, collaboration, and technology integration. The findings emphasize the need for specialized ESP materials, stronger curriculum–industry alignment, and institutional support. Although AI may offer opportunities to enhance religious tourism English education, its effectiveness cannot be established from the present findings. Further research should investigate the use of specific AI-enabled tools in vocational English instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to gain a better understanding of the vocational English teachers in tourism programs address the mismatch between curriculum and content materials by creating their own teaching materials, interacting with peers, and utilizing AI-based tools, particularly in religious tourism context. Albeit, these approaches demonstrated teacher flexibility, they also revealed structural shortcomings such as the lack of specialized ESP modules, institutional support and untapped potential of AI. Findings have been to confirm that while the Kurikulum Merdeka is characterized as flexible, this lack of clear benchmarks and resources for context tends to disempower teachers' agency in classrooms and motivation among students.

The main weakness of this study was the paucity of the small sample size and focus on only East Java, which might limit generalization. Further research in this field would be of great help in span different geographical regions and tourism context, include student and policymaker viewpoints and study long-term integration of AI. Finally, several important changes need to be made. The integration of the curriculum pedagogy and technology is necessary for vocational students to develop communicative competence to succeed in the international tourism industry.

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