Cultivating Eco-Faith Literacy: Challenges in Aligning Vocational English Curriculum with Sustainable Religious Tourism Needs

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate how English teaching in Indonesian vocational high schools, particularly within tourism-related programs, contributes to the development of communicative, ethical, and sustainability-oriented competencies required in the emerging field of religious tourism. Beyond merely identifying implementation gaps, the study seeks to clarify the conceptual alignment among the *Merdeka* Curriculum, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and the growing demand for eco-religious tourism literacy. The research addresses an underexplored area in ESP studies: the integration of sustainability in religious tourism into vocational English education. Using a phenomenological-interpretivist approach, this qualitative study draws on semi-structured observations conducted in English classrooms within tourism departments at vocational high schools in East Java. Data were analyzed inductively to explore teachers' pedagogical interpretations, classroom practices, and the contextual factors shaping curriculum enactment. The implementation of vocational English teaching remains limited despite the curriculum's emphasis on autonomy and innovation. Teachers' interpretations of curricular flexibility varied widely, leading to inconsistent pedagogical strategies. Some teachers independently integrated project-based learning simulations that embed religious values, environmental sustainability, and local cultural identity, yet such practices were not institutionalized. Furthermore, insufficient professional development, lack of ESP-oriented resources, and limited institutional support hindered systematic alignment between English instruction and the competencies needed in religious tourism contexts. The study contributes conceptually by demonstrating that under implementation is not merely a technical issue but reflects broader challenges of curriculum interpretation, teacher capacity, and contextual responsiveness. It highlights a significant gap in the existing ESP literature regarding sustainability-driven, value-based tourism communication skills. These insights underscore the need for developing structured ESP modules tailored to religious tourism and eco-tourism, supporting vocational schools in aligning English instruction with emerging industry demands.

Keywords: ESP, sustainable tourism, vocational high school, *merdeka* curriculum, religious tourism.

■ INTRODUCTION

Over the years, religious ecotourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments in Indonesia's tourism sector, driven by global demands for travel experiences that combine spiritual enrichment, cultural engagement, and environmental preservation (Bhushan et al., 2024; Romadhon et al., 2025; Verances et al., 2024).

With many religious groups in this country, Indonesia has substantial potential to develop religious tourism grounded in local wisdom and ethical values. Numerous studies highlight that religious tourism must incorporate sustainability standards to protect cultural, social, and spiritual heritage, while ensuring reciprocal benefits within a community-based tourism approach aligned

with religious ethical principles (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Hennida et al., 2024; Jaelani et al., 2025; Nana, 2024). In this context, English language competence plays a pivotal role not only as a tool for communication but also as a medium to cultivate ethical awareness, intercultural understanding, and sustainability-oriented thinking among future tourism practitioners. Through language learning activities, such as explaining cultural practices, guiding pilgrims, or narrating heritage-preservation efforts, students can internalize moral values, reflect critically on sustainable practices, and enact responsible behavior toward sacred sites (Baloch et al., 2023; Manggaprouw et al., 2025). Thus, in vocational tourism programs, English proficiency becomes part of a broader moral-professional competence essential for participating in Indonesia's sustainable religious tourism development (Purwati et al., 2023; Suhairom et al., 2016; Widiastuti et al., 2021)

However, current English curricula in many vocational schools do not yet support these demands. Existing studies have reported persistent gaps between classroom practices and the communicative, ethical, and sustainability-related competencies required in the religious tourism industry (Aljarelah, 2024; Buerkle et al., 2023; Hamwy et al., 2023; Jabri & Ariani, 2025; Li et al., 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2021). These studies reveal that English instruction still relies heavily on textbook-based lessons that fail to reflect real religious-tourism communication scenarios, leaving students who understand English theoretically but struggle to guide pilgrims, interpret local customs, or articulate conservation principles in authentic settings. Although the introduction of the *Merdeka* curriculum theoretically provides schools with the flexibility to adapt learning materials to local contexts, including religious ecotourism, recent research in vocational tourism education indicates that such flexibility has not translated effectively into practice (Bongco et al., 2022; Lahiya et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2023).

This issue becomes more critical when viewed through the lens of existing needs-analysis studies in Indonesia, which consistently show a significant gap between vocational English curricula and the actual communicative demands of religious tourism. Previous analyses reveal that learners in tourism programs urgently require English for guiding pilgrims, explaining religious rituals, managing cross-cultural communication, and promoting local sacred sites, skills that are rarely provided in current ESP materials (Hidayat et al., 2025; Zein et al., 2020). Most of the researchers reported that most vocational courses still rely heavily on textbook-driven topics unrelated to real practices in faith-based tourism; they may, for instance, struggle to lead pilgrims, interpret local religious customs for foreign guests, or explain preservation strategies at sacred sites (Scott & Husain, 2021; Yasin et al., 2023). They found that students lack exposure to genre-based texts used in religious tour operations such as pilgrimage briefings, devotional site explanations, and sustainability guidelines. Much of the empirical research highlights a clear research gap: despite the rapid growth of religious tourism, there is still no ESP model that integrates communicative needs with content specific to Indonesia's religious tourism context that is also moral, cultural, and sustainability-oriented (Safitri et al., 2023; Sakti et al., 2024). As a result, students often master English only at the theoretical level, leaving them unprepared to interact with international pilgrims or to promote Indonesia's religious heritage. Thus, developing English materials grounded in sustainable religious tourism is urgently required to enhance students' communication skills, strengthen their understanding of religious values, and support the sustainability of Indonesia's expanding faith-based tourism sector (Anggayana, 2023; Habiburrahim et al., 2022).

Apart from that, recent Indonesian government educational reforms, the *Merdeka* Curriculum, emphasize flexible learning and contextualized learning (Lestari et al., 2023; Yunita et al., 2023). Notwithstanding such a policy that insinuates local adaptation of materials, commercial application within vocational education, in particular, religious tourism, is below par. Notwithstanding this policy encouraging the local adaptation of materials, its commercial application in vocational education, particularly in religious tourism, remains below expectations. Several studies report that teachers frequently struggle to integrate English instruction with communicative competence demands, sustainability education, and moral or religious values (Hossain, 2024; Jon et al., 2021; Sakiruddin et al., 2023). This persistent challenge in both curriculum and industry highlights the need for an approach that combines ESP with sustainability and religious principles.

Given the background problem, this study does not aim merely to "find out how Sustainable Religious Tourism can support English Language Education." Instead, it focuses on understanding the lived experiences of vocational English teachers as they seek to connect English Language Education with the principles of Sustainable Religious Tourism under the *Merdeka* Curriculum. This approach aligns with a phenomenological design, which seeks to interpret how teachers make sense of curriculum expectations, contextual challenges, and their personal efforts to integrate communicative, ethical, and sustainability values in faith-based tourism contexts. Through this lens, the study explores teachers' perceptions, challenges, and meaning-making processes in implementing culturally relevant English learning aligned with Indonesia's religious tourism needs in Indonesian Vocational High Schools. It underscores the significance of curriculum development in helping students develop their linguistic skills and

environmental and ethical tourism practices. Through an analysis of current curriculum practices, teacher attitudes, and contextual barriers, this study seeks to inform understandings that, in the long run, may contribute to a more culturally and contextually sensitive English education for Indonesia's model of sustainable faith-based tourism. Such that in the recent studies, so far, the researchers organized of one research question as follows:

1. How does the Indonesian vocational high school English curriculum to date correspond to the demand for sustainable religious tourism?
2. What difficulties do teachers experience in the integration of sustainable and religious tourism contexts into EFL learning under the *Merdeka* Curriculum?
3. How do teachers interpret, negotiate, and enact their roles in integrating communicative, ethical, and sustainability-oriented learning within English instruction for religious tourism contexts?

■ METHOD
Research Design

This was a qualitative method, based on a phenomenology design used by the researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was deliberately selected because the research aims to deeply explore and interpret the lived experiences of teachers and curriculum practitioners who directly engage with the English-language curriculum for tourism in Indonesian vocational education. Interpretive phenomenology is particularly advantageous as it focuses not only on describing experiences but also on uncovering the *essence of a phenomenon*, the underlying meanings, beliefs, and contextual interpretations that shape how participants understand and enact the curriculum. Compared with other qualitative designs, such as case study or ethnography, interpretive

phenomenology is more suitable because it allows the researcher to identify shared experiential structures across different participants rather than concentrating on bounded systems or long-term cultural immersion. This makes it an ideal approach for answering the research questions, which require capturing authentic perceptions, subjective interpretations, and the common experiential patterns that influence how sustainable religious tourism–related English instruction is implemented in vocational settings.

Data Source and Participants

The respondents in this study were English teachers at vocational high schools in several cities in East Java. Fifteen teachers were involved in the study. The participants were English subject teachers who were members of the Vocational High School English Language Teachers Association or the *Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran* (MGMP) at the provincial level in East Java. From these members, the researchers applied specific inclusion criteria to identify eligible participants. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being an active English teacher in a vocational high school; (2) having at least two years of teaching experience in Vocational High School in English subjects; (3) teaching in one of the three major study programs, Travel Business Management, Tour Operation Management, or Hospitality; and (4) willingness to participate in interviews and provide curriculum-related information. Teachers who were not currently teaching Vocational High School English subjects, had less than two years of experience, or taught outside the three selected study programs were excluded. Based on these criteria, fifteen teachers were recruited, and six of them, who met an additional criterion of having extensive experience in curriculum implementation, were selected as core community members. Six of these teachers were chosen as community members. Experienced Vocational High School English teachers who were actively teaching the curriculum in a Vocational High School context were chosen as participants. Also, the investigators selected English teachers who taught only in three of the major study programs, namely Travel Business Management, Tour Operation Management, and Hospitality. A snapshot of demographic characteristics among selected participants is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demography

Code	Gender	Programs	Region	Teaching Experience
T1	Male	Hospitality	Malang	> 5 years
T2	Male	Travel Business Management	Surabaya	< 5 years
T3	Male	Travel Business Management	Blitar	> 5 years
T4	Female	Hospitality	Tuban	> 5 years
T5	Female	Travel Business Management	Blitar	> 5 years
T6	Female	Tour Operation Management	Malang	< 5 years

There were fifteen participating English teachers in the initial data-gathering round; however, we purposefully focused on a sub-sample of six central participants, referred to as T1–T6, during the final analysis and report. The six teachers were purposefully sampled owing to their extensive experience with the vocational English curriculum and their involvement in tourism-related study programs. Data from all 15 teachers were used to provide a broader context and insights, but only the six "core" teachers' data were analysed in depth using phenomenological techniques. Accordingly, all analytical readings and quotes in this study are based exclusively on the views of these six participants, as shown consistently throughout Table 1 and across the paper. This methodological choice was made to sustain analytical depth, consistency, and

alignment with the phenomenological interest in common lived experiences, thereby excluding ambiguity about the origin of the findings.
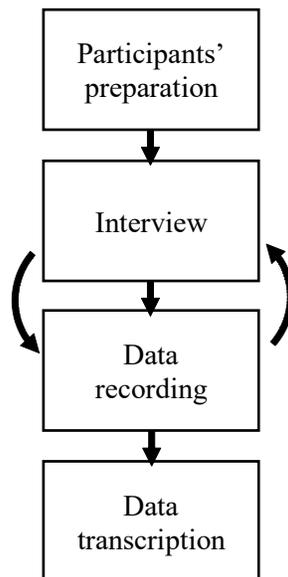
Data Collection

The researcher employed a combination of observation and semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth and contextualized data (Kallio et al., 2016; Mazhar, 2021). The observation focused on classroom teaching and learning activities, including the implementation of instructional strategies, teacher-student interactions, students' engagement during lessons, and the use of learning materials and media. The observation was guided by a checklist outlining key points, including lesson structure, instructional delivery, student participation, classroom atmosphere, and assessment practices. This allowed the researcher to systematically capture naturally occurring behaviors without direct involvement in the activities.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol developed from an extensive literature review. The protocol was piloted with a small group, and its content validity was confirmed through expert judgment to ensure the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the research objectives. Data collection took place between August and October 2025, with each interview lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All interview sessions were audio-recorded using a smartphone application to facilitate accurate verbatim transcription.

To enhance data trustworthiness, the researcher conducted member checking by reconfirming the interview data with participants to ensure accuracy and consistency with their intended meanings. Follow-up interviews were arranged when further clarification was required. The observation data were then systematically integrated with the interview transcripts and analyzed thematically to enable data triangulation. Finally, the verified interview recordings were transcribed in full to support detailed and rigorous qualitative analysis.

Figure 1. Data collection

Instruments

Following this, the key questions in the interview guide were developed and further elaborated in the discussions to verify their relevance and comprehensibility. The interview guide served as a semi-structured research tool

with several key open-ended questions that guided the data collection (Barriball & While, 1994). Although the main questions were always asked of all respondents, flexibility was allowed regarding follow-up or probing when interviewees provided different answers. This method allowed the researcher to pursue broader emerging themes in further depth and capture rich contextualized data. Each question was intentionally designed to elicit rich stories relevant to the study's purpose, enabling participants to convey their lived experiences, realities, and meanings. Thus, the information obtained from this instrument aligned with participants' true-to-life experiences and offered subtle insights into the research questions.

Table 2. Research main themes and their questions

Themes	No	Questions
Curriculum Alignment	1	What is your assessment of the compatibility of the current English curriculum with the requirements of sustainable religious tourism?
	2	In your opinion, what do you think, does the *Merdeka* Curriculum can promote the incorporation of religious and sustainable values in English teaching?
	3	Are these the kinds of learning outcomes that adequately prepare students to engage in face-to-face communication in religious tourism? Why or why not?
Teaching Practices and Challenges	4	How can you incorporate religious and ethical values into your English class for tourism students?
	5	What are the key obstacles you encounter when designing and teaching lessons in the context of sustainable and faith-based tourism?
	6	Can you provide a few classroom activities or projects related to religious tourism or sustainability?
Curriculum Development and Improvement	7	What areas of the English program do you think need changes to better support sustainable religious tourism?
	8	What (sorts of) materials or other resources would be useful in getting you to integrate sustainability & religious contexts better into EFL classes?
	9	How do collaborations and professional networks like MGMP support you in adjusting the curriculum to meet these new needs?

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, guided by phenomenology, was employed to analyze the data, with a focus on capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences. Following the sequential phases proposed by Clarke & Braun (2006), the analysis began with data familiarization, in which interview transcripts were read and reread to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' accounts. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful units and relevant excerpts related to the phenomenon under investigation.

To achieve greater analytical rigor, the researcher organized these codes into a thematic matrix, enabling systematic comparison across participants and facilitating the identification of patterns, similarities, and divergences in experiences. Through this matrix-based analysis, initial codes were clustered into candidate themes

that reflected shared meanings and core experiential structures.

The thematic construction was conducted through an iterative analytical and interpretive process, allowing the researcher to progress from descriptive accounts toward deeper, latent interpretations of participants' lived experiences, thereby strengthening the credibility and analytical depth of the findings.

The results were upheld because they were grounded in participants' authentic voices and reflected the depth of analysis required for a
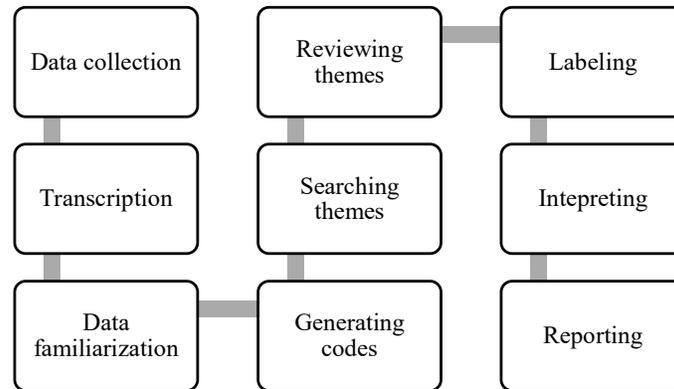
Figure 2. Data analysis process

phenomenological study. To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the results, the researcher used methodological triangulation, including interviews, field notes, and reflective journals (Donkoh, 2023). Field notes, in this research, were produced to be systematically written during and after classroom observations, as well as interviews, and made it possible to record contextual information, such as influential practices, teacher–student joins visits in their daily routines of staff culture and relations that may not have been entirely captured in the audio data. The notes offered nuanced descriptions of the conditions that facilitated the interpretation of verbal discourse. Furthermore, reflective journals were kept during the study to document the researcher's reflections, initial responses, emotional reactions, and analytical ideas. In-depth, reflective journals provided a mechanism for researchers to critically explore the possibility of bias and facilitated a more sophisticated phenomenological interpretation of participants' lived experiences. Transcriptions of interviews, field observation notes, and reflective diaries were subject to comparative, cumulative analysis to validate emergent themes. This facilitated an in-depth and refined presentation of the participants' lifeworld, wherein the essence of the phenomenon was preserved consistently and accurately despite varying perspectives and data materials.

■ **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Findings of this study were discussed by the researcher and categorized into three themes: Curriculum Alignment with Sustainable Religious Tourism, Teaching Practices and Challenges, and Curriculum Development and Improvement. These themes are derived from a close analysis of the data and depict the issues that contribute to the effectiveness of English language teaching in religious tourism-related vocational higher education. According to the thematic road map below:

Curriculum Alignment with Sustainable Religious Tourism

Among the participants, a recurring theme emerged: the present English curriculum in
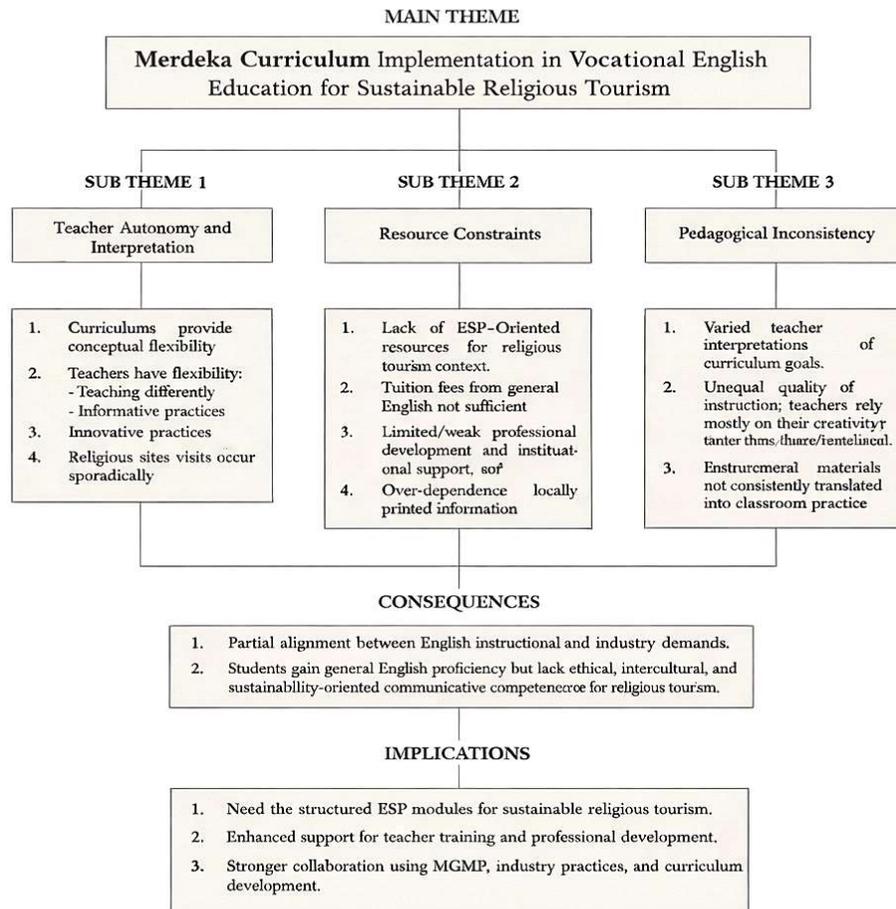
Figure 3. Result mapping

vocational schools does not sufficiently meet the practical and moral needs of sustainable religious tourism. Although the *Merdeka* Curriculum has been mostly welcomed for its flexibility and student-centred teaching, teachers saw its empirical implementation in tourism-related study programs as limited in scope and contextually oriented. This viewpoint highlights a disjunction between the theoretical aims of the curriculum and the realities faced by teachers who teach English for specific purposes in religiously influenced tourism contexts. The T1 explains in his excerpt:

"I still focus mainly on general English skills rather than communication specific to faith-based tourism. Classroom activities continue to emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and simple conversations instead of preparing

students for real tasks such as guiding religious visits, describing local beliefs, or interacting politely with international pilgrims ...." (T1)

Based on the statement above, it is evident that while some students become proficient in general English, they do not receive sufficient exposure to specific lexis and idiomatic expressions, as well as to the intercultural communication skills required to lead religious tourists or promote local faith-based attractions.

Likewise, T2 and T3 revealed that there were no elements of engagement with sustainability or religious tourism content in the current syllabus. Then, according to the T2 excerpt:

"Students can describe tourism services in English, but they struggle to express the ethical and spiritual values needed in

sustainable tourism. They mostly focus on practical language use, such as explaining destinations or helping customers, yet lack the ability to include cultural sensitivity, respectful interaction, and moral or religious messages that characterize religious tourism in Indonesia.... (T2)

It emphasizes that T2's students are already capable of using English for common tourism-related communication, for example, describing tourist attractions or assisting visitors. However, they still face difficulties expressing deeper aspects that are especially important in the contexts of sustainable and religious tourism.

In the meantime, T4 and T5 also held the belief that genuine tendencies could serve as one source of guidance in reorganizing moral and value-based learning experiences through a project-based vocational curriculum. They also pointed out that although the curriculum supports teaching for understanding, it significantly hinders the teacher's scope for initiative and creativity in the classroom. As T4 noted:

"...The curriculum actually gives us room to develop projects that link English with our students' moral values. But it really depends on how creative the teacher is in designing the lessons." (T4)

According to T4, the curriculum should be both effective and flexible to support vocational school teachers in improving their values and skills when teaching English for tourism. A responsive curriculum allows teachers to adapt learning materials to industry needs and students' future career demands. Similarly, T5 highlight:

"In Indonesia, learning materials that specifically address tourism-based instruction at the vocational school level, particularly in the tourism sector, remain limited. This situation creates challenges for me as a teacher, as the general curriculum tends to

focus more on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skill development." (T5)

According to the excerpt above, T5 argued that there is a lack of learning materials focused on tourism-based education in vocational schools. This issue poses a challenge for teachers, as the curriculum primarily emphasizes theoretical knowledge rather than the practical skills needed in the tourism industry. As a result, teachers struggle to provide relevant and effective learning experiences that prepare students for real workplace demands. In line with this view, T6 added:

"...The curriculum currently implemented is still the same as that used in senior high schools. Therefore, I usually rely on information from the MGMP to adjust tourism-related learning materials for vocational school students, particularly those focused on sustainable religious tourism..." (T6)

The T6 explains that the English curriculum in vocational high schools in Indonesia remains largely similar to that of general senior high schools. As a result, it continues to emphasize theoretical knowledge rather than practical, industry-oriented skills.

The findings of this study clearly reveal a persistent gap between the conceptual intentions of the *Merdeka* Curriculum and the contextual realities of English language teaching within tourism-oriented vocational high schools, particularly those emphasizing sustainable religious tourism. While the curriculum is praised for its flexible, student-centred framework, its practical implementation remains primarily oriented toward general English instruction rather than the specialized linguistic and intercultural skills required in faith-based tourism settings.

Teachers consistently expressed that English learning continues to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and daily conversation, as exemplified

by T1's assertion that instructional practices still revolve around foundational language skills rather than communicative tasks essential for guiding pilgrims, explaining spiritual meanings, or promoting local religious attractions. (Scheyvens et al., 2021; Tauchid et al., 2022; Wei, 2024). This finding reinforces the notion that mastery of specific lexis, idiomatic expressions, and culturally respectful communication is insufficiently supported in the current curriculum.

Further, although the tourism major should integrate ethical, cultural, and moral values associated with sustainable tourism, no teachers reported engaging students in activities that embed sustainability principles or religious content within communicative tasks, as inform from Wahyudi and Jufrizal (2023) and Saputro and Savitri (2025). While T2 confirms that students may competently explain tourism services in English, they struggle when tasked with expressing deeper ethical and spiritual elements central to Indonesia's religious tourism landscape. This indicates that industry-required competencies, such as conveying spiritual significance or practicing culturally sensitive service, remain underdeveloped.

Moreover, the teachers' insights highlight inconsistency between curriculum rhetoric and classroom autonomy. While Utami et al. (2025) stated that *Merdeka* Curriculum encourages project-based learning, which could foster authentic and value-based instruction. Teachers like T4 and T5 emphasize a lack of relevant learning materials and insufficient guidance in contextual curriculum adaptation. This creates a dependence on teacher creativity, which may lead to unequal instructional quality across schools (Damanik & Widodo, 2024). T5's concern about the scarcity of tourism-specific English-learning resources further underscores the limited curricular responsiveness to rapidly evolving professional needs in the tourism industry.

The situation is further intensified by the alignment between vocational English and the general senior high school curriculum, as noted in T6. As noted by Shrestha et al. (2025) and Danarta et al. (2024) which explains that the curriculum is not fully differentiated for vocational contexts, English instruction remains theoretically driven rather than industry-oriented, creating barriers for teachers who must independently interpret, modify, and supplement learning content through professional communities such as MGMP.

These findings indicate a systemic misalignment between policy and practice. Although the *Merdeka* Curriculum advocates contextual, skills-based English learning, teachers in sustainable religious tourism programs face multiple constraints, including limited resources, insufficient curriculum specificity, and challenges in operationalizing moral and cultural values into vocationally relevant instruction. These contextual obstacles limit vocational schools' ability to produce graduates who are not only proficient English communicators but also culturally and ethically competent tourism practitioners.

Teaching Practices and Challenges

Participants described a range of instructional strategies used to integrate ethical and sustainability principles into English teaching within the context of religious tourism. T1 and T4 highlighted approaches such as encouraging responsible behaviour and social awareness through communicative activities, including dialogues and role-play tasks that reflect real interactions in the hospitality and tourism sectors. These classroom practices were seen as enhancing students' language proficiency while simultaneously building their understanding of ethical conduct and environmental sustainability, skills considered essential for supporting sustainable religious tourism. However, despite these positive initiatives, teachers faced challenges such as limited access to context-appropriate materials, inadequate collaboration with tourism industry partners, and increased demands on

lesson preparation, which together make it difficult to align curriculum requirements with efforts to cultivate students' ethical and ecological awareness through English instruction. As T1 explained:

"I design role-play activities such as serving as hotel receptionists for guests attending religious tourism events, and the learning process goes beyond practicing polite expressions. I must ensure that students not only acquire relevant language skills but also internalize the values of hospitality, courtesy, and respect. However, implementing such contextual learning remains challenging due to limited instructional resources, insufficient industry exposure, and the need to integrate sustainability principles into English instruction. As a result, teachers must constantly adapt their teaching strategies to prepare students for authentic communication within the growing sector of sustainable religious tourism." (T1)

Similarly, T4 highlighted that classroom simulations help students internalize sustainability principles:

"Learners are invited to think about working in a dining establishment committed to sanitation and ethical service. Through this, they recognize that sustainability in tourism means upholding quality practices and moral accountability…" (T4)

Furthermore, T5 integrated contextual learning through local case studies of religious tourism destinations to support students' vocational English competence. By introducing real examples such as halal resorts and environmentally responsible pilgrimage sites, T5 aimed to expand students' tourism-related vocabulary while fostering awareness of sustainability within a religious framework. However, T5 also acknowledged that integrating sustainability concepts into English instruction remained challenging, as students often struggled with unfamiliar terminology and required additional scaffolding to grasp both the language and its contextual meanings. As T5 described:

"We explore how sustainable tourism sites handle waste responsibly, protect natural surroundings, and uphold religious ethics. I think this lesson enriches students' vocabulary, but it also demands extra guidance to help them understand that environmental care..." (T5)

The T6 reported that one of her pedagogical approaches is group projects, and students are asked to design mock travel tour plans for religious destinations, such as pilgrimage or religious tourism sites, based on eco-travel and ethical tour-guiding factors. They allow students to use English in real-life situations and to explore how sustainability aligns with professional tourism beliefs. As T6 describes:

".....when developing a tour package, students are required to incorporate aspects such as minimizing waste, appreciating local traditions, and behaving responsibly at tourism sites, especially those related to religion. I emphasize that sustainable actions are essential for maintaining the environment and ensuring a positive experience for both visitors and host communities." (T6)

The participant further noted that English serves as a bridge for communicating environmental ethics on a global scale, encouraging students to view themselves as ambassadors of their culture and community. According to T6:

"When students introduce religious tourism sites in English, they are not simply marketing destinations. They are also helping to build wider awareness of religious tourism as a field that supports respectful travel experiences, encourages cultural

appreciation, and caters to visitors' specific lifestyle needs." (T6)

However, there are still challenges, mainly in harmonising English-language education with the sustainability concerns embedded in religious tourism. A lack of sustainability-focused teaching materials was the most common perception. "*We understand that most of the textbooks are too general and underdeveloped to fulfil the religious tourism market,*" T2 said. This assertion becomes relevant, bearing in mind that a significant proportion of the resources currently used in vocational high school centres do not adequately address the linguistic and cultural aspects that characterise sustainable and ethical tourism management grounded in religious beliefs.

Current resources focus more on simple, everyday English conversation but do not provide the information needed to educate people about caring for their environment and sacred places, or about what to do when tourists arrive. Furthermore, T3 elaborated on this issue by emphasizing the inconsistency of teacher-created materials:

"*...While teachers try to create their own materials, the absence of clear national guidelines or model modules makes the process inconsistent." (T3)*

This inconsistency hinders the possibility of pursuing standardization in integrating sustainability with cultural preservation, respect for different faiths, and eco-friendly practices in teaching English. In the absence of formal support, teachers face challenges in finding a holistic approach that links linguistic competence with moral and ecological awareness in the study of sustainable religious tourism.

A further important problem is students' insufficient exposure to real-life situations, as noted by T6. They seldom have opportunities to meet foreigners or practice as guides, so the motivation to learn practical English for religious tourism remains low. This absence of real contact not only has harmful effects on students' intercultural communicative competence (Cong-Lem, 2025; Xu et al., 2025), but also does not allow students to assimilate principles of sustainable tourism through experiential learning. In a sustainable religious tourism context, future students are in fact anticipated to play the role of cultural ambassadors, conveying a message that combines faith based hosting and environmental conscious behaviour (Ellins et al., 2025).

The second research question seeks to investigate the difficulties teachers face in incorporating religious and sustainability values into English teaching, more specifically in relation to religious tourism education. Major barriers identified include the lack of context-specific teaching resources to support religious and sustainable tourism emphases, the haphazard nature of teacher-developed materials, and limited exposure by students and teachers to authentic religious tourism environments. These difficulties all contribute to the lack of effective integration between English teaching and sustainable religious tourism education.

Taking this a step further is the incorporation of sustainability with religious faith-based communication in ESP programs, and particularly when religion and tourism unite, an essential yet overlooked aspect in vocational training. Religious tourism inherently combines spiritual, cultural, and ecological forms of travelling that require instruction that not only enables students to be functionally proficient in language use but also raises awareness of ethical and sustainable conduct. Nevertheless, according to T2 and T3, the majority of available textbooks are "too general" and do not position the learning of English within sustainable religious tourism in real practice. This suggests a significant pedagogical gap between the type of education and what students encounter in a multi-dimensional tourism industry that operates on principles of sustainability and religiosity. Paragraph The lack of culture-specific content was consistent with Bui's (2022)

argument that ESP materials frequently overlook localized, value-oriented information.

Moreover, the findings confirm the study of Hamidah and Dungcik (2024), which argues for experiential learning through working with religious tourism industries, mosques, or pilgrimage centers in order to promote meaningful language use. However, participants in this study found it difficult to incorporate such workplace learning opportunities into practice due to a lack of institutional cooperation and the inflexibility of the curriculum. Similarly, Drãguleasa et al. (2024) underline that ESP, with a focus on the sustainability of English education, requires institutional frameworks and not just individual efforts. These projects, without local-level support, are piecemeal. Thus, to effectively embed sustainability in vocational religious tourism education, English programs should reconsider their curricula by embedding case-based resources and exercises, intersectoral cooperation, and value-centered pedagogy that link faith, communication, and sustainability.

Curriculum Development and Improvement

Finally, all participants stressed the need to develop more context-specific materials and to improve the relationships among teachers, industry professionals, and curriculum writers. They claimed that English teaching in vocational schools, especially in tourism and hospitality, should not only develop linguistic ability but also foster ethical values rooted in religious tourism.

T1 and T2 suggested the need for new English textbooks or learning modules that incorporate local cultural literacy, including topics such as halal travel, eco-friendly hospitality, and religious historical tourism. They argued that these themes would provide students with the opportunity to practice language structures in natural and culturally sensitive contexts, as well as raise awareness of sustainability, an ethical underpinning of religious tourism. As T1 expressed:

"When English learning materials highlight tourism based on heritage sites or nature-friendly destinations, students can build their language skills while also learning to promote responsible and culturally respectful travel experiences." (T1)

Similarly, T2 highlighted the link between language learning and sustainability:

"…students should learn how to communicate in English about sustainable accommodation or tourism packages that align with specific traveler needs. These skills are essential for their future careers in the hospitality and tourism industry. At the same time, they help students develop a sense of responsibility toward promoting environmentally conscious travel services." (T2)

T3 also proposed that using authentic resources, such as brochures, web pages, and videos from local religious tourist attractions, could make the learning experience more engaging and meaningful. Genuine sources, he justified, immerse students in the actual discourse of tourism promotion and encourage them to critically reflect on the relationship between sustainability and spirituality in tourism. As T3 words:

"Using resources from nearby tourism sites helps students see how English is applied in real situations. It shows them how language can support local culture, promote sustainability, and strengthen community identity…" (T3)

Furthermore, T4 and T5 highlighted that collaboration among professionals was a key factor for continually improving the design of the English curriculum, particularly to align with sustainable religious tourism. Both participants noted that the collaboration in the MGMP, the English teachers' forum, is an essential professional learning community where teachers share their teaching strategies, co-plan lessons,

and discuss pedagogical obstacles. However, they also expressed fears that the current composition of MGMP meetings appears to lead toward a greater preoccupation with administrative compliance and report writing rather than true pedagogical enhancement.

Second, T4 observed that while MGMP is a strong place for teachers' collaboration, it has also not been an ideal place for curriculum development, specifically in integrating sustainability and religious tourism values into the teaching of English. A lot of conversations "*end at paper*," T4 said, and there isn't much space to play around or experiment with interesting ways of including ethical tourism practices, cultural respect, and ecological awareness in classroom materials.

Similarly, T5 argued that the forum could be more effective if it connected educators with real-world practitioners, such as tour operators, local religious leaders, or representatives from sustainable tourism initiatives. According to T5:

"If MGMP engaged professionals from the tourism industry, the discussions would become more insightful and relevant to real workplace demands. Their input could help teachers design English lessons that integrate principles of sustainable tourism, including cultural appreciation, environmental protection, and responsible behavior within the tourism sector…" (T5)

Finally, T6 emphasized the crucial role of teacher training and institutional support in effectively integrating sustainability and religious values into English language teaching for tourism. T6 remark:

"Teachers need workshops about how to teach English with sustainability and religious values together." (T6)

This comment highlights the gap between planned curriculum and enacted instructional practice. T6's concern highlights a broader problem for Vocational schools: the sustainable and faith dimensions are 'impacted by individual teachers rather than institutional processes.' Insufficient professional development and systemic guidance may not help teachers identify sustainability issues within an overarching religious tourism framework for students, leading to fragmented or unaligned student-constructed knowledge.

The third research question of the study generated suggestions centered on improving contextualized instruction, strengthening professional collaboration, and enhancing teacher training. Teachers highlighted that curriculum materials connected to real-life vocational contexts, such as local tourism industries and environmental sustainability, better reflected learners' future professional needs and encouraged more meaningful language use in the classroom. These insights align with the principles of ESP course design described by Kosimov (2021), which stresses the importance of conducting systematic needs analysis and integrating authentic learning materials to ensure close alignment with workplace demands. By incorporating community resources into lessons, teachers observed improvements not only in students' language proficiency but also in their awareness of practical contexts in their field. This finding supports Sari et al. (2025), who emphasize the value of contextualized learning to strengthen student engagement and the relevance of instruction. Despite these benefits, teachers also acknowledged ongoing challenges, including limited access to appropriate materials, time constraints for material development, and the need for sustained professional development to support such instructional approaches (Cayabas & Sumeg-Ang, 2023; Fairman et al., 2023; Sadeghi & Richards, 2021).

Sustainability inserted into religious tourism education built up the language proficiency and moral consciousness for protecting the environment as well as performing in the ethical

service of a religious tourist (Hassan et al., 2024; Marshall, 2025). For instance, waste management in halal hotels, community-based tourism in sacred destinations, and ethical communication with pilgrims could serve as modules for learning to internalize the sustainability ethic. This fusion could be the foundation of English studies, combined with a balance across economic, cultural, and ecological fields, as Islam's principle of proportionality offers moderate teachings that protect every creation. In addition, it is believed that partnership work, such as that coordinated through MGMP, was expected to drive curriculum development and change in practice, mainly at an operational level. Teachers also recommended adding external stakeholders, such as local tour operators, religious scholars, and those involved in sustainable tourism, to discussions on knowledge sharing and contextually relevant curriculum. This approach has to be matched with Rumanti et al. (2025) and Khoiriyah et al. (2024), which contend that multi-stakeholder partnerships are necessary to address the disconnect between education and the real-world needs of sustainable religious tourism. Furthermore, the summary of the research findings can be seen in the table below:

Table 3. Matrix of participants' perspectives across sub-themes

| Sub-Theme	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
Focus of English Instruction	Emphasizes general English skills (grammar, vocabulary, basic conversation) rather than faith-based tourism communication. *"I still focus mainly on general English skills rather than communication specific to faith-based tourism…"*	Prioritizes practical tourism language but acknowledges lack of ethical and spiritual expression. *"They struggle to express the ethical and spiritual values needed in sustainable tourism…"*	Notes misalignment between curriculum goals and ESP demands, resulting in generic instruction.	Views the curriculum as potentially supportive, depending on the teacher's creativity.	Sees instruction as overly theoretical with limited vocational relevance.	States that vocational English remains similar to general senior high school English.
Integration of Religious Values	Limited integration; religious values are not systematically embedded in language tasks.	Recognizes the absence of structured religious content in the syllabus.	Identifies a lack of curricular guidance for value-based integration.	Believes religious values can be integrated through projects if teachers take the initiative.	Argues that religious content is underrepresented in existing materials.	Relies on external forums (MGMP) to supplement religious tourism content.
Integration of Sustainability Concepts	Sustainability is acknowledged but not explicitly taught through English tasks.	Students lack the ability to articulate sustainability ethics in English.	Notes the inconsistency due to teacher-designed materials without standard models.	Sees sustainability as teachable through contextual projects.	Uses local sustainable tourism cases but finds conceptual integration challenging.	Embeds sustainability in project-based tour planning activities.
Curriculum Flexibility (*Merdeka* Curriculum)	Perceived as flexible in theory but unclear in practical guidance.	Flexibility exists but is not operationalized in teaching practice.	Lacks concrete models for ESP implementation under the *Merdeka* Curriculum.	Appreciates curricular autonomy but notes uneven implementation.	Feels flexibility is constrained by a lack of relevant resources.	Uses curriculum flexibility informally through MGMP support.
Availability of Teaching Materials	Reports scarcity of context-specific ESP resources.	Criticizes textbooks as too general for the needs of religious tourism.	Highlights the inconsistency due to the absence of national ESP modules.	Depends heavily on teacher-created materials.	Stresses the lack of tourism-specific English materials.	Adapts materials independently due to curriculum limitations.
Perceived Student Readiness for Religious Tourism	Students are linguistically competent but not prepared for authentic religious tourism tasks.	Students manage basic tourism communication but fail in ethical-spiritual discourse.	Students lack exposure to genre-specific texts on religious tourism.	Students' readiness depends on project-based exposure.	Students require extensive scaffolding to link language and sustainability.	Students improve readiness through simulated tour-planning projects.
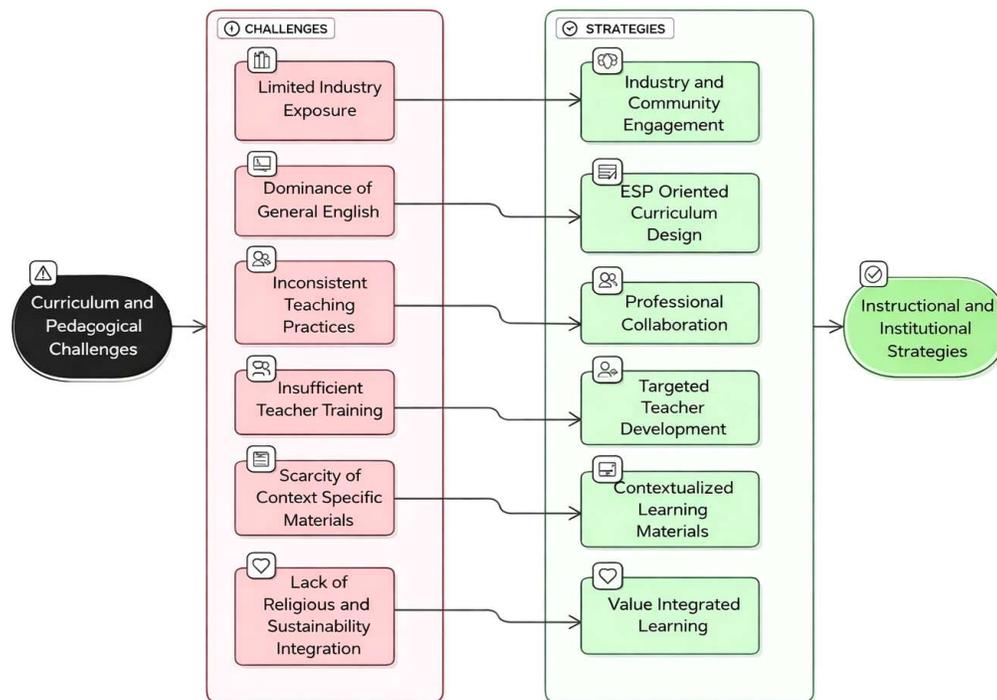
Figure 4. Challenges vs strategies diagram

Table 4. Summary of research findings

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Operational Definition	Representative Quotations
Curriculum Misalignment with Sustainable Religious Tourism	Dominance of General English	English instruction prioritizes general grammar, vocabulary, and everyday conversation rather than faith-based tourism communication and intercultural competence.	"I still focus mainly on general English skills rather than communication specific to faith-based tourism…" (T1)
	Limited Integration of Religious and Sustainability Values	Absence of explicit content addressing ethical, spiritual, and sustainability dimensions of tourism within the English syllabus.	"They struggle to express the ethical and spiritual values needed in sustainable tourism…" (T2)
	Theoretical Orientation of Curriculum	The curriculum emphasizes abstract knowledge rather than vocational, industry-based English skills relevant to the tourism industry.	"The general curriculum tends to focus more on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skill development." (T5)
Pedagogical Practices for Ethical and Sustainable Tourism	Role-play and Simulation-Based Learning	Use of communicative activities that simulate real tourism and hospitality interactions, embedding ethical and moral values.	"I design role-play activities such as serving as hotel receptionists for guests attending religious tourism events…" (T1)

	Project-Based Learning	Student-centered projects that require learners to apply English to authentic tourism planning with sustainability and ethical considerations.	"Students are required to incorporate aspects such as minimizing waste, appreciating local traditions…" (T6)
	Contextual and Localized Learning	Integration of local religious tourism cases to contextualize English learning and sustainability concepts.	"We explore how sustainable tourism sites handle waste responsibly…" (T5)
Instructional Challenges	Lack of Context-Specific Teaching Materials	Scarcity of English textbooks or modules tailored to sustainable religious tourism contexts.	"Most of the textbooks are too general and underdeveloped to fulfil the religious tourism market." (T2)
	Inconsistent Teacher-Created Materials	Teachers independently design materials without standardized guidance, resulting in variability in content quality.	"The absence of clear national guidelines or model modules makes the process inconsistent." (T3)
	Limited Industry Exposure	Insufficient collaboration with tourism stakeholders to support authentic learning experiences.	"Limited instructional resources, insufficient industry exposure…" (T1)
Curriculum Development Needs	Context-Specific Learning Modules	Need for English materials integrating local culture, halal tourism, eco-friendly hospitality, and religious heritage.	"Students can build their language skills while also learning to promote responsible travel experiences." (T1)
	Use of Authentic Resources	Incorporation of brochures, websites, and videos from real religious tourism destinations.	"Using resources from nearby tourism sites helps students see how English is applied in real situations." (T3)
	Professional Collaboration and Training	The necessity of teacher training and meaningful MGMP collaboration focused on pedagogy rather than administration.	"Teachers need workshops about how to teach English with sustainability and religious values together." (T6)

■ **CONCLUSION**

This study finds that the current English language curriculum in Indonesian vocational high schools aligns only partially with the communicative, ethical, and sustainability needs of sustainable religious tourism. Although the *Merdeka* Curriculum provides flexibility for contextual learning, its implementation has been more theoretical and lacks connection to real practices in faith-based tourism. The teaching of English is still focused on general linguistic skills. It does not encompass the integration of moral and sustainability values that are critical to students' preparation as ethical communicators in religious tourism settings. Teachers also report major challenges, including a scarcity of contextualized teaching materials, inconsistent implementation of the curriculum, and limited exposure to authentic religious tourism environments. All the while, there is inadequate

institutional backing for integrating sustainability and religious perspectives into the teaching of English. As a result, students are not fully equipped to advocate for language that encourages sustainable, faith-based practices in tourism. In this context, the study identified the need for curriculum strategies that promote contextualized materials (lecture notes), interdisciplinarity, and ongoing teacher education. Authentic halal-friendly destination resources, sustainable hospitality, and pilgrimage sites would make the English lessons more appropriate.

In addition, ESP teacher training courses should focus on developing ESP pedagogy that incorporates ethical behaviour, cultural awareness, and environmental sustainability. Implemented properly, these programs foster graduates who are linguistically competent, morally sound, and environmentally aware, and therefore able to help facilitate Indonesia's vision for sustainable religious tourism. Hereafter, it is appropriate to examine students' perceptions and learning experiences, as well as insights that have been teacher-centered. Other comparative and experimental studies are recommended to explore the efficacy of curricula across different regions and to test sustainability-integrated English modules. Interdisciplinary models in language learning and sustainable faith-based tourism could be strengthened by joint research conducted by educators, industry, and religious authorities.

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