

An Analysis of Low Achiever Students' Difficulties in Learning English at SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba

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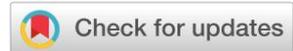
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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the difficulties faced by low achiever students in learning English at SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba, a rural school with limited educational resources. Using a descriptive qualitative case study, data were gathered from five low-performing students and two English teachers through interviews, observations, and documentation. Findings reveal that internal issues, such as low motivation, poor vocabulary, and grammatical difficulties, are compounded by external factors, including inadequate support, traditional teaching methods, and the unproductive use of technology. Although digital tools have potential, limited digital literacy and infrastructure hinder their effectiveness. The study calls for contextualized teaching, teacher training, and improved technological support to enhance English learning for low achievers in rural areas.

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1. Introduction

English is a crucial international language and a key skill for academic and professional success. However, many Indonesian students, particularly in rural areas like SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba, struggle to master English. Low achiever students, those whose academic performance falls below expected standards, face various challenges in developing fundamental English skills such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, speaking, and reading comprehension.

English plays an essential role as a global language and serves as a vital means for communication, education, and commerce worldwide. Recognized as the most commonly spoken second language, it brings together individuals from various linguistic and cultural communities, enabling the exchange of ideas, access to knowledge, and cooperation beyond national boundaries (Ritonga et al., 2020; Weda et al., 2021; Prihandoko et al., 2021). As the dominant language in fields such as the internet, scientific research, aviation, and international relations, English proficiency has become increasingly important in today's interconnected and fast-paced world (Weda et al., 2022; Sachiya et al., 2025).

These difficulties stem from both internal and external factors. Internally, low motivation, lack of self-confidence, and limited cognitive ability play significant roles (Slavin, 2006; Santrock, 2011). Externally, ineffective teaching methods, minimal exposure to English, limited school resources, and low family support contribute to poor outcomes (Roinah, 2019; Musthafa, 2001; Rahman, 2018; Youngsun et al., 2024). Warschauer & Healey (1998) state that technology has the potential to broaden access to educational materials, personalize learning experiences, and boost student motivation. However, these benefits can only be realized if both infrastructure and user competence are in place. At SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba, significant challenges remain in using technology effectively for English learning, especially for low achievers who often need more structured and guided support. As such, technological limitations are a critical factor that must be examined in understanding students' learning difficulties.

Socio-economic backgrounds also widen this gap. Students from lower-income families usually lack access to additional learning materials, such as English books, supplementary courses, or technological devices that could support their learning. As a result, they rely more heavily on classroom instruction, which often falls short of addressing their specific learning needs. Suparno (2007) notes that students who do not receive family support for learning or lack access to additional learning resources experience even greater obstacles in acquiring English proficiency.

Research on low achievers often explores general academic difficulties or the effectiveness of teaching strategies like Problem-Based Learning or flipped classrooms (Al-Zoubi & Younes, 2015; Bella Chiou, 2023; Ajmal et al., 2021). However, studies focusing specifically on the English learning difficulties of low achievers in rural Indonesian contexts, especially related to technology use, remain limited.

Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the specific English learning challenges faced by low achievers at SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba. It aims to identify key linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors contributing to their struggles, with the goal of informing more inclusive teaching strategies and policies to support English learning in rural schools.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach (Creswell, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2013) to explore the experiences and perceptions of participants in-depth. The data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and documentation analysis. The interviews involved five 11th-grade students identified as low achievers and two experienced English teachers. Classroom observations were carried out to assess student participation, interaction patterns, and the instructional strategies used by teachers. Additionally, documentation such as students' written work and school learning materials was analyzed to support and enrich the data. The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba over two months, from February to March 2025.

3. Result and Discussion

This section presents and analyzes the findings of the research regarding the difficulties experienced by low achiever students in learning English at SMA Negeri 7 Bulukumba. The findings are categorized into three main themes based on the research questions: (1) internal and external factors contributing to students' difficulties; (2) perceptions of teachers and students toward those difficulties, especially in the use of technology; and (3) challenges in the English learning process related to digital and social media influences.

3.1 Internal Factors Affecting Low Achiever Student

One of the most significant findings in this study is the low level of motivation and self-confidence among low achiever students. Most of the students perceived English as a difficult and irrelevant subject, which negatively affected their intrinsic motivation to learn. Their lack of self-confidence was evident in their reluctance to participate in class discussions or activities.

Data 1

"Sometimes I know the answer, but I don't want to speak. I'm afraid I will be wrong and my friends will laugh." (Student 2)

"I often feel shy and worried that others will judge me if I make mistakes." (Student 1)

These quotes highlight the psychological barriers, such as fear of failure, anxiety, and low self-esteem, that hinder students' active engagement in the classroom. Dörnyei (2001) notes that affective factors such as these play a significant role in inhibiting second language acquisition, particularly in developing speaking skills. Supporting this, classroom observations revealed that these students tended to be passive, rarely volunteered to answer questions, and often avoided eye contact with the teacher, further confirming their lack of confidence.

a. Limited Vocabulary and Grammar Knowledge

A majority of students demonstrated a limited grasp of basic vocabulary and grammar. This deficiency hindered their ability to understand instructions, comprehend reading materials, and construct meaningful sentences.

Data 2

"I find it difficult to understand what the teacher says or what's written in the book. I don't know many of the words." (Student 3)

"I often get confused with grammar. I don't know when to use past or present tense." (Student 4)

These statements reflect an overreliance on the teacher for interpreting learning materials and a lack of independent strategies for acquiring English. Analysis of students' written work further revealed frequent errors in sentence structure,

subject-verb agreement, and the misuse of verb tenses. This suggests that students do not receive sufficient reinforcement or practice, either at school or at home. As a result, they continue to struggle with fundamental language skills and lack the confidence to express themselves effectively in English.

3.2 External Factors Influencing Learning Difficulties

a. Family Support and Socio-Economic Background

Most of the participants in this study came from economically disadvantaged families and had parents with limited formal education. These circumstances contributed to a lack of academic support at home and minimal access to learning resources.

Data 3

“My parents can’t help me with homework. They don’t understand English and want me to help at home after school.” (Student 5)

Some students also reported having to work in the fields before attending school, which left them physically exhausted and less focused during lessons. These socioeconomic constraints not only limited students’ opportunities for academic growth but also placed additional burdens that disrupted their learning processes. These findings are in line with previous research by Howley et al. (2009) and du Plessis (2014), which emphasized how poverty and parental education levels significantly affect students’ academic performance, particularly in rural areas where educational resources and support systems are limited.

b. Traditional Teaching Practices

English instruction in the observed classrooms was predominantly teacher-centered. The learning process was focused on textbook reading, note copying, and grammar exercises, with little opportunity for interaction or meaningful language use.

Data 4

“Students are expected to memorize and take notes. There’s little chance to practice speaking or writing creatively.”

This approach reflects a lack of communicative and student-centered methodology, which is essential for engaging low achiever students. Observations revealed that most classroom activities did not encourage student participation or critical thinking. As a result, students were often passive and disengaged during lessons. Such traditional practices are consistent with critiques by Lie (2007) and Sulistiyo (2016), who argue that English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia frequently fails to address diverse learner needs and overlooks strategies that foster active learning and language use in real contexts.

3.3 Technological Challenges in Learning English

a. Passive and Unproductive Use of Technology

Although most students had access to digital devices such as smartphones, their use of technology was largely unproductive in the context of learning. Devices were primarily used for entertainment, including browsing social media, watching videos, or playing online games.

Data 5

“I use my phone mostly for social media, not for studying. I don’t know what apps are good for learning English.” (Student 4).

“I tried using Duolingo, but I didn’t understand how it worked and no one could help me.” (Student 1)

These responses indicate a significant gap in digital literacy, as well as a lack of guidance on how to use technology as an effective language learning tool. Classroom observations also revealed no structured integration of digital platforms in the teaching process. As noted by Warschauer and Healey (1998), technology can only enhance language acquisition when it is purposefully and meaningfully embedded in instructional practices. In this context, the absence of digital support

further hinders students' progress, particularly for low achievers who need more scaffolded and accessible learning strategies.

4. Conclusion

This study concluded that low achiever students in rural schools face multiple challenges in learning English. These include internal factors such as low self-confidence, lack of vocabulary, and poor grammar skills, as well as external factors like minimal family support, traditional teaching methods, poor classroom conditions, and underutilized technology. While technology could enhance learning, its potential remains untapped due to digital illiteracy and infrastructure limitations. A more structured, supportive, and technology-integrated approach is essential to improving outcomes for low achiever students in similar contexts

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