



Teachers' Perspectives on Designing HOTS-Based English Materials Integrated with the Local Wisdom of South Sulawesi

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how English teachers in Islamic junior secondary schools (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, perceive and design Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based English teaching materials integrated with the local Bugis-Makassar values of Sipakatau, Sipakalebbi, and Sipakainge. Data were collected from ten purposively selected English teachers through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that teachers generally hold a sound conceptual understanding of HOTS as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and create, although the depth of this understanding varies according to individual teaching experience. Teachers integrate local wisdom into HOTS-based materials both textually, through culturally grounded texts such as local folktales and procedural texts on traditional cuisine, and practically, by modeling respectful and cooperative classroom interaction. However, teachers face considerable challenges, including diverse student abilities, limited instructional time, and a scarcity of English-language resources that incorporate local culture. These findings extend Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological perspective and the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy by illustrating how culturally embedded content can reduce students' psychological distance from English and support higher-order cognitive engagement. The study offers practical implications for teacher training, curriculum development, and the design of contextually and culturally responsive English teaching materials in Indonesian Islamic secondary education.

Keywords: *Bugis-Makassar culture; English Language Teaching; Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS); local wisdom; teaching materials*

Introduction

English language learning occupies a strategic position in preparing human resources who are able to adapt to, and contribute actively within, an increasingly globalized world. The function of English is not merely that of a tool for international communication; it also serves as a medium for developing thinking skills, academic literacy, and readiness to face the demands of the twenty-first-century workplace (Setiawati, 2024). Within formal education, English proficiency should ideally extend beyond basic linguistic competence toward strengthening critical, creative, and reflective thinking so that students can understand, interpret, and manage complex information in accordance with the demands of twenty-first-century learning (Budiyanto et al., 2024).

In response to these demands, several countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, and Finland, have deliberately embedded Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) within their education systems as a strategic effort to cultivate learners who are autonomous, reflective, and creative (Chun & Abdullah, 2019). Within English language learning specifically, a HOTS-oriented approach facilitates more meaningful engagement by involving students in tasks such as analyzing authentic texts, examining diverse viewpoints, solving problems situated in real-life contexts, and producing language creatively; learners are guided to actively construct understanding and use language purposefully rather than relying solely on rote memorization of linguistic elements (Saraswati et al., 2023). This concept is rooted in the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy introduced by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), which holds that learning should extend beyond the simple recall or comprehension of information and instead encourage students to critically interpret, process, and construct knowledge through active intellectual engagement.

Nevertheless, the implementation of HOTS-based English language learning at the classroom level continues to face considerable challenges, particularly when instructional materials are not contextual and do not align with students' socio-cultural backgrounds. Integrating local wisdom into the development of teaching materials therefore represents a relevant approach for bridging global demands with a learning context close to students lived experience (Barella, 2020).

In South Sulawesi, the local wisdom of the Bugis-Makassar people, reflected in the values of *Sipakatau* (mutual respect as human beings), *Sipakalebbi* (mutual appreciation), and *Sipakainge* (mutual reminding toward goodness), embodies principles of respect for human dignity, social ethics, and moral responsibility in communal life (Sudirman et al., 2024). From a socio-ecological perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that individuals' learning experiences cannot be separated from the social and cultural environments in which they interact; learning becomes more meaningful when educational content is closely associated with students' everyday experiences and cultural identities.

Embedding Sipakatau, Sipakalebbi, and Sipakainge in educational settings plays a crucial role in shaping communication ethics and social attitudes and in preventing intolerance, and carries strong pedagogical potential for integration into HOTS-based English learning as an authentic context that encourages students to analyze social meanings, evaluate cultural values, and reflect on their relevance to contemporary life (Arifin et al., 2026).

Evidence accumulated over the past five years supports the claim that integrating local wisdom into English language learning generally increases motivation, engagement, and learning quality, and shows that culturally familiar materials make English learning more relevant, interactive, and comprehensible (Herika et al., 2024; Emeklioglu & Balkir, 2025). Teaching materials that combine HOTS and local wisdom have likewise proven effective in fostering students' higher-order thinking skills while enriching teachers' pedagogical practice (Noorhapizah et al., 2020). At the same time, teachers occupy a central position in this process: rather than simply implementing predetermined curricula, they function as pedagogical agents who interpret educational goals, modify learning materials, and contextualize instruction according to students' needs and socio-cultural backgrounds (Safirah et al., 2024; Shah & Zakaria, 2024).

Despite this growing body of evidence, most available studies on local-wisdom-based English materials remain small-scale, context-specific, and focused primarily on the products of material development rather than on the pedagogical reasoning that underlies them. Comparatively little is known about how teachers in Islamic secondary education specifically interpret and combine HOTS principles with local cultural values such as Sipakatau, Sipakalebbi, and Sipakainge when designing English teaching materials, and about the practical challenges they encounter in doing so within the South Sulawesi context. This gap between the theoretical promise of HOTS–local-wisdom integration and the limited empirical understanding of teachers' actual design processes forms the basis of the present study.

Building on this gap, this study aims to explore in depth the perspectives of teachers in designing English teaching materials based on Higher Order Thinking Skills integrated with the local wisdom of South Sulawesi. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How do English teachers perceive HOTS in English Language Teaching (ELT)? (2) How do teachers integrate the local wisdom of South Sulawesi into HOTS-based English materials? and (3) What challenges do teachers face in designing such materials?

Rather than examining only the products of teaching-material development, the study also explores teachers' thought processes, the pedagogical considerations underlying their decisions, and how they interpret cultural values in the design of learning materials. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on teachers' perspectives within Madrasah Tsanawiyah in South Sulawesi, a context in which HOTS-based, culturally grounded English materials have rarely been examined empirically, and in its contribution of practical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and

teacher-training institutions seeking to design contextual, relevant, and sustainable English language learning.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore teachers' perspectives on designing HOTS-based English teaching materials integrated with the local wisdom of South Sulawesi. This approach was selected because the study aims to understand how teachers respond to the demands of twenty-first-century learning, particularly in developing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and connecting learning with cultural values, while a case study design allows the researcher to examine a specific issue in depth, in this instance, how teachers combine global learning demands with local cultural values (Daňek & Uργοšíková, 2024).

This research was conducted in Islamic junior secondary schools (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. These schools were selected because English learning within them is expected not only to improve students' language skills but also to develop their critical thinking and character, and because the local context is rich in the values of Sipakatau, Sipakalebbi, and Sipakainge, which emphasize respect, appropriate social behavior, and responsibility. Ten English teachers were selected as participants using purposive sampling, based on criteria including active engagement in English teaching, experience in developing or using teaching materials, and prior understanding of HOTS or contextual learning (Bell et al., 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' understanding of HOTS, their approaches to designing teaching materials, and the ways in which they incorporate local wisdom into their teaching, while open-ended questionnaires complemented the interview data and gave teachers additional freedom to share their ideas and experiences (Karaman & Büyükkıdık, 2023). The researcher served as the primary research instrument, directly involved in planning the research, collecting data, analyzing results, and drawing conclusions, and remained reflective about possible bias throughout the research process (Zuurbier & Roopnarine, 2023). Interview guidelines, questionnaires, and field notes were used to support data collection.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data (Lochmiller, 2021). The researcher first read all data carefully, then coded important segments and grouped these codes into categories, such as teachers' understanding of HOTS, their approaches to designing materials, their use of local wisdom, and the challenges they encountered, which were subsequently developed into the main themes reported below.

Credibility was strengthened through the use of two complementary data-collection methods and member checking, dependability was supported by maintaining a consistent research process, confirmability was addressed through detailed field notes, and transferability was supported by providing a clear description of the research setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher explained the purpose of the research to participants and obtained their consent prior to data collection; participants' identities were kept confidential, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

Results

This section presents the findings on teachers' perspectives regarding the design of HOTS-based English teaching materials that integrate the local wisdom values of South Sulawesi. The data, obtained through in-depth interviews, are organized into themes aligned with the three research questions. To preserve participant confidentiality, informants are identified as Teacher 1 through Teacher 10.

Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation of HOTS in ELT

Regarding the first research question, the interview data show that informants possess a solid conceptual understanding of Higher Order Thinking Skills. Informants interpreted HOTS as advanced thinking abilities that require students to analyze, evaluate, and create critically, rather than merely memorize information. As Teacher 1 explained:

"Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) refer to advanced thinking abilities that guide students to analyze and think critically based on their own understanding. Students are not only expected to memorize information, but also to understand texts, express their opinions, and complete tasks as creatively as possible."

Similarly, Teacher 5 emphasized the cognitive dimension of HOTS with reference to higher-order thinking taxonomies:

"Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) refer to advanced cognitive abilities that involve analyzing, evaluating, and creating. HOTS encourages students to think critically and creatively rather than merely memorizing information."

Although most informants demonstrated a mature understanding of the concept, variation existed in the depth of comprehension across participants. Teacher 3, for instance, candidly acknowledged theoretical limitations while describing an ongoing effort to apply the concept in practice:

"Honestly, I do not fully understand HOTS yet, but I think HOTS is a way of thinking that is not only memorizing, but also trying to understand."

In terms of classroom implementation, HOTS was applied through activities designed to stimulate deep reasoning, including tasks requiring students to infer

implied meanings from texts, identify moral values, discuss case studies, and compare textual content with personal opinions or real-life situations. Open-ended questions based on “why” and “how” served as the primary instrument for triggering analytical depth and discouraging superficial, one-word answers.

Integration of South Sulawesi Local Wisdom into HOTS-Based Materials

With respect to the second research question, the data reveal a systematic approach to designing student-centered learning materials. The design process begins with analyzing learning outcomes, formulating HOTS indicators, selecting relevant local contexts, and constructing challenging assessment instruments. Teacher 5 outlined these steps sequentially:

“1. Determining the learning objectives, 2. Developing HOTS-based indicators that involve analysis, evaluation, and creation, 3. Selecting relevant texts or contexts, 4. Designing challenging tasks or questions, 5. Providing discussion and problem-solving activities.”

Regarding local content, the interviews show that informants are highly familiar with the philosophical values of Bugis-Makassar culture, specifically Sipakatau (mutual respect as human beings), Sipakalebbe (mutual appreciation), and Sipakainge (reminding one another toward goodness). These values were consistently described as crucial for embedding character education within language learning. The integration of local wisdom is realized through two dimensions: textually, in the content of the material itself, and practically, in classroom interaction processes. Textually, cultural elements are embedded in descriptive texts, local folktales, traditional ceremonies, and procedural texts about traditional cuisine. Teacher 1 offered a concrete example:

“One example is a procedure text about traditional Bugis food, such as onde-onde.”

Practically, local wisdom values are integrated as behavioral norms during the learning process, particularly within group work. Teacher 5 explained:

“I incorporate local wisdom by using texts and examples related to local culture and by encouraging students to practice these cultural values during classroom interactions, such as respecting each other during discussions.”

These interactive activities are supported by a range of task types, including group discussions, debates, opinion-essay writing, role plays, and project-based learning activities such as creating posters and dialogues.

Challenges in Designing Integrative Materials

In response to the third research question, the data reveal significant challenges arising from both external and internal constraints. A major constraint identified was the cognitive gap within the classroom: not all students were ready to undertake higher-order thinking tasks, requiring teachers to spend additional time adjusting

the language level of materials so that all students could participate effectively. Teacher 1 noted:

“One of the main challenges is the different levels of students’ abilities. Not all students are ready to handle higher-order thinking tasks. In addition, classroom time is limited.”

A second major constraint was the limited availability of local-culture-based English resources. The absence of official textbooks or digital resources combining English with South Sulawesi local wisdom compels informants to produce materials independently or to modify generic texts. Teacher 5 added:

“The main difficulty is the limited availability of English-language resources and references related to local wisdom ... additional training and the development of more specific teaching materials related to HOTS and local wisdom are still needed to optimize the learning process.”

This scarcity of references has driven some informants, such as Teacher 3, to rely on self-directed learning, and participants widely expressed a strong expectation for specialized training to strengthen their instructional-design competencies.

Discussion

This section connects the empirical findings from the interviews with the theoretical frameworks proposed in the study to provide a deeper interpretation of their meaning.

Critical Reflection on HOTS Perceptions

The finding that informants such as Teacher 1 and Teacher 5 conceptualize HOTS as the processes of analyzing, evaluating, and creating confirms the alignment of field-level understanding with the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). The shift away from rigid, memory-based rote learning toward more analytical and argumentative engagement indicates an awareness of twenty-first-century learning demands. Through problem-solving activities and open-ended questioning, a student-centered learning process emerges in which English is used communicatively and purposefully rather than being confined to the mastery of formal grammatical structure.

At the same time, the variation observed among informants, exemplified by Teacher 3’s candid acknowledgment of incomplete theoretical understanding, suggests that conceptual grasp of HOTS in this context is uneven and would likely benefit from structured, ongoing professional development.

Pedagogical Urgency of Integrating HOTS and Bugis-Makassar Local Wisdom

The synergy between HOTS and local wisdom observed in the findings can be read as a strategic step toward a more balanced and holistic education. This finding reinforces Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological theory, which holds that a child's learning process cannot be separated from the cultural environment in which they interact. When instructional content includes local elements such as *onde-onde* or other cultural traditions, it appears to reduce the psychological distance students feel toward English. Local culture provides an authentic, familiar context that lowers cognitive load and allows students' cognitive resources to be redirected toward practicing critical thinking skills, thereby supporting the parallel development of language proficiency, cultural identity, and higher-order cognition.

Challenges and Implications for Teacher Support

The challenges reported by teachers, diverse student readiness, limited instructional time, and a scarcity of English-language resources grounded in local culture, point to a gap between the pedagogical ambition of HOTS–local-wisdom integration and the institutional support currently available to realize it. This finding is consistent with prior studies indicating that the successful implementation of HOTS depends not only on teachers' conceptual understanding but also on adequate time, training, and material resources (Shah & Zakaria, 2024; Safirah et al., 2024).

The tendency of teachers in this study to develop materials independently, in the absence of published local-wisdom-based English resources, illustrates both their pedagogical agency and the structural burden this places on individual practitioners. Sustained progress in this area will likely require coordinated support from schools, curriculum developers, and teacher-training institutions, for example, through shared repositories of local-wisdom-based English materials and targeted professional development in HOTS-oriented material design, rather than relying solely on individual teachers' initiative.

Conclusion

This study explored teachers' perspectives on designing HOTS-based English teaching materials integrated with the local wisdom of South Sulawesi within the context of Madrasah Tsanawiyah. The findings show that teachers generally understand HOTS as a learning approach that encourages critical thinking, analysis, creativity, and problem-solving beyond memorization, although their understanding and application of HOTS vary depending on their pedagogical experience and knowledge. Teachers sought to integrate HOTS into English teaching materials through activities such as discussions, text analysis, presentations, debates, and open-ended questioning, and they integrated local wisdom values, *Sipakatau*, *Sipakalebbi*, and *Sipakainge*, into learning materials and classroom activities through local stories, cultural topics, and contextual interaction.

Nevertheless, teachers face several challenges in designing HOTS-based materials integrated with local wisdom, including differences in students' learning abilities, limited instructional time, a lack of English-language references related to local culture, and limited institutional support. This study is limited by its qualitative case study design and its focus on ten teachers within Madrasah Tsanawiyah in a single province, which means the findings are context-specific and not intended to be statistically generalized to other settings.

In suggestion, cooperation among teachers, schools, curriculum developers, and educational institutions is needed to support the development of English teaching materials that are innovative, grounded in higher-order thinking skills, and integrated with local wisdom values. Future research could usefully extend this work through classroom observation or document analysis of teacher-produced materials to complement self-reported perceptions, through comparative studies across school types or regions, and through the development and empirical testing of HOTS- and local-wisdom-based English teaching materials in actual classroom practice.

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