

TEACHING FACTORY INTEGRATION IN ENGLISH FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS AT POLITEKNIK ELBAJO COMMODUS

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ABSTRACT

Effective customer complaint handling in English is a vital professional skill in the maritime and tourism sectors, especially in Labuan Bajo, a premier destination that significantly boosts Indonesia's national GDP through tourism revenue. However, conventional classroom instruction often falls short in equipping vocational students with the practical confidence and professionalism required by industry, highlighting a persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of integrating the teaching factory model at Senja Eatery with traditional classroom methods to enhance third-semester Diploma III Hospitality students' competencies in the English for Handling Complaints course at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from 15 students, two lecturers, and three industry partners via 16 observation sessions, semi-structured interviews, and performance assessments based on an ESP rubric, with thematic analysis performed using NVivo. Results showed marked improvements in students' language fluency, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution skills, particularly within the authentic teaching factory environment, despite challenges like limited simulation facilities. The integrated approach successfully bridged theory and practice, better preparing students for workplace demands. Recommendations involve increased investment in simulation infrastructure, targeted lecturer training, and broader industry partnerships to refine vocational English curricula.

Keywords: English for handling complaints, teaching factory, vocational education, hospitality industry, Indonesian tourism

INTRODUCTION

In an era of rapid globalization, the maritime and tourism industries have become strategic pillars of Indonesia's economy, with Labuan Bajo emerging as a premier marine tourism destination. Effective handling of customer complaints in English is a critical professional skill that directly influences customer satisfaction, loyalty, and business reputation in multicultural service environments (Bremner, 2013; Ma'fiyah & Sumardiono, 2023). Tourism contributes significantly to national GDP, and poorly managed complaints can result in substantial financial and reputational losses for hospitality businesses (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2024). In this context, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays an essential role in preparing vocational students for industry-specific communication demands, particularly in high-pressure complaint resolution scenarios (Basturkmen, 2010; Hyland, 2021).

The hospitality and tourism sectors require integrated competencies combining language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Tasar et al., 2021). ESP courses such as English for Handling Complaints must therefore incorporate authentic tasks that mirror real workplace interactions, including negotiating solutions with diverse international customers (Basturkmen, 2010). However, traditional classroom instruction in vocational institutions often relies heavily on theoretical exercises and controlled role-plays, which fail to replicate the unpredictability and authenticity of real customer encounters (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hamid et al., 2018). This discrepancy frequently leaves graduates underprepared for immediate workplace application, creating a persistent theory-practice gap widely documented in Indonesian vocational education (Widodo, 2017; Sutrisno et al., 2020).

To address this gap, the teaching factory model has gained prominence in Indonesian vocational education by providing simulated yet authentic work environments that enhance practical competencies (Hamid et al., 2018; Siagian et al., 2025). Studies have shown that teaching factory implementation can improve students' workplace skills by up to 30% compared to conventional methods (Sutrisno et al., 2020). Recent research further demonstrates that hybrid models combining teaching factory with classroom learning significantly boost ESP speaking fluency and conflict resolution abilities in hospitality contexts (Ma'fiyah & Sumardiono, 2023; Tiarina & Rahmiati, 2025; Tasar et al., 2021).

While previous studies have examined teaching factory applications in general vocational skills or ESP in urban settings, they rarely focus on English for Handling Complaints within the specific maritime-tourism ecosystem of Labuan Bajo—a region heavily dependent on international visitors. Moreover, most existing research explores either classroom-based or standalone teaching factory approaches, with limited investigation into their systematic integration at a single institution collaborating with an industry partner under the same foundation. The present study differs by examining a unique hybrid implementation at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus, where the teaching factory operates through direct collaboration with Senja Eatery (a restaurant owned by the same foundation), enabling students to handle genuine customer complaints from real tourists in English. This contextual novelty lies in the seamless institutional-industry linkage and the focus on a tourism-dependent region, offering fresh insights into optimizing ESP delivery for immediate employability in Indonesia's priority maritime and tourism sectors.

Politeknik eLBajo Commodus, a vocational institution dedicated to human resource development in maritime and tourism, offers the English for Handling Complaints course to third-semester Diploma III Hospitality students. The course integrates classroom instruction with teaching factory sessions at Senja Eatery, allowing students to apply polite expressions, negotiation strategies, and cross-cultural awareness in authentic settings. Despite reported benefits of hybrid approaches, challenges such as limited simulation facilities, lecturer familiarity with teaching factory methods, and coordination complexities remain underexplored in regional vocational contexts (Sutrisno et al., 2020; Siagian et al., 2025).

This study therefore investigates the effectiveness of integrating teaching factory sessions at Senja Eatery with traditional classroom learning to enhance students'

competencies in English for Handling Complaints. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the integration of teaching factory and classroom approaches improve students' performance in English for Handling Complaints?
2. What challenges and opportunities emerge from implementing this hybrid approach in a vocational hospitality program?

By employing a qualitative case study design involving observations, interviews, and performance assessments of 15 students, two lecturers, and three industry partners, this research provides empirical evidence grounded in authentic data collection within the integrated setting. The third question on replicability is addressed through practical recommendations derived directly from identified challenges, opportunities, and observed outcomes, ensuring alignment between research questions, methodology, and findings. This study contributes to refining vocational ESP curricula by offering a context-specific hybrid model that bridges theory and practice, ultimately supporting the development of job-ready graduates for Indonesia's maritime and tourism industries.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the integration of teaching factory and classroom approaches in enhancing students' English competencies for handling complaints. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, responsible for data collection, observation, and interpretation through direct engagement with participants and the context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This role allows for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in its natural vocational setting at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus, where the teaching factory is implemented at Senja Eatery a restaurant managed by the same foundation. The case study approach was chosen for its strength in providing rich, contextual insights into real-world educational practices in the maritime and tourism industries (Yin, 2018).

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they represented key stakeholders relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample included 15 third-semester Diploma III Hospitality students enrolled in the English for Handling Complaints course, chosen because they were actively applying practical communication skills in both classroom and teaching factory settings. Additionally, two lecturers experienced in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and three industry partners from Senja Eatery were involved, as they provided diverse perspectives on teaching effectiveness and industry alignment.

Research Instruments

To collect data, three main instruments were developed and used: an observation protocol, a semi-structured interview guide, and a performance assessment rubric. The observation protocol consisted of a structured checklist and open field notes, focusing on key behaviors such as use of polite expressions, fluency in complaint resolution, cultural sensitivity, and student engagement. It was designed based on ESP principles for complaint handling (Basturkmen, 2010) and piloted in two initial sessions to refine categories.

The semi-structured interview guide included 10 open-ended questions (e.g., “How does the teaching factory environment influence students’ confidence in handling real complaints compared to classroom simulations?” and “What challenges arise in coordinating industry-based learning?”). The guide was reviewed by two ESP experts for content validity and clarity, ensuring questions aligned with research objectives.

The performance assessment rubric evaluated four dimensions—English fluency and accuracy, cultural sensitivity and politeness, conflict resolution strategies, and professionalism—on a 5-point scale. It was adapted from established ESP rubrics and validated through expert review (two lecturers and one industry partner) and a pilot assessment on sample role-plays to confirm inter-rater reliability (agreement rate >85%). These instruments were acceptable supplements to the researcher-as-instrument approach, enhancing systematic data collection while allowing flexibility for emergent insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered through triangulation to strengthen credibility. Observations spanned 16 sessions (8 classroom and 8 teaching factories at Senja Eatery), each 90 minutes, using the protocol to record interactions and performance. Performance assessments involved 10 authentic simulations at Senja Eatery and 8 classroom role-plays, scored jointly by the researcher, lecturers, and industry partners. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes each) were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase process: data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. NVivo software facilitated coding and pattern identification (e.g., themes like “enhanced fluency in authentic settings” and “logistical challenges”). Interpretation linked themes directly to research questions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation (multiple data sources and instruments), member checking (sharing summaries with participants for verification), peer debriefing (discussions with two colleagues), and an audit trail of protocols and notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity was maintained via a research journal documenting the researcher’s potential biases as course instructor. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution. All participants provided written informed consent, were assured anonymity (via codes like “Student 1”), and could withdraw anytime without consequence. Data were stored securely.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the data from observations, performance assessments, and interviews yielded three primary themes: enhanced practical competencies through authentic practice, strong alignment with industry expectations, and persistent challenges alongside emerging opportunities. These themes directly address the research questions on the extent of improvement from the hybrid approach and the challenges and opportunities involved.

Enhanced practical competencies through authentic practice

Observations across 16 sessions revealed that the hybrid approach markedly improved students' performance in English for Handling Complaints. In classroom sessions, students effectively acquired theoretical knowledge, including polite expressions (e.g., "We fully understand your concerns" or "Please allow us to resolve this promptly") and basic resolution strategies through text analysis, group discussions, and controlled role-plays. However, their application remained somewhat mechanical and hesitant, often limited by the predictable nature of simulated scenarios.

In contrast, teaching factory sessions at Senja Eatery provided authentic contexts where students handled real or highly realistic customer complaints, such as incorrect orders, delayed service, or dissatisfaction with food quality. Field notes documented increased confidence, spontaneity, and fluency as students navigated unpredictable interactions. For example, during one session, Student 7 responded to a complaint about cold food by apologizing sincerely, offering an immediate replacement, and providing a complimentary dessert—all delivered fluently in English while maintaining composure. Such responses were rarely observed in classroom settings. Performance assessments using the ESP rubric further supported these observations. Table 2 summarizes the comparison of mean scores across the two settings.

Table 2.
Comparison of Student Performance Scores in Classroom and Teaching Factory Settings

Dimension	Classroom (SD)	Mean	Teaching Factory Mean (SD)	Key Observations
English Fluency and Accuracy	3.9 (0.45)		4.4 (0.32)	Greater spontaneity in real interactions
Cultural Sensitivity and Politeness	3.7 (0.41)		4.2 (0.35)	Better adaptation to international tourists
Conflict Resolution Strategies	3.6 (0.48)		4.3 (0.30)	More proactive solution offerings
Professionalism	3.8 (0.42)		4.3 (0.31)	Improved composure under pressure
Overall Mean	3.8 (0.42)		4.2 (0.31)	Substantial enhancement in authentic setting

N = 15 students; scores on 5-point rubric assessed by two raters (inter-rater agreement >85%).

These improvements align with experiential learning theories, where authentic tasks foster deeper communicative competence compared to controlled environments (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Widodo, 2017). The teaching factory's real-world pressure encouraged rapid decision-making and linguistic adaptability, supporting

recent findings on hybrid models in vocational ESP (Ma'fiah & Sumardiono, 2023; Tasar et al., 2021).

Strong alignment with industry expectations

Interviews with the three industry partners from Senja Eatery consistently highlighted the hybrid approach's relevance to workplace demands. One partner stated: "Students in the teaching factory handle complaints more naturally—they listen actively, apologize appropriately, and offer solutions without hesitation, just like our staff need to do with international guests" (Industry Partner B). Partners emphasized that the authentic setting helped students develop cultural sensitivity, such as recognizing indirect complaints from Asian tourists versus direct feedback from Western visitors, echoing Bremner (2013) and Hyland (2006).

Direct feedback during teaching factory sessions further reinforced alignment. Industry partners noted that students quickly incorporated suggestions, leading to noticeable progress in professionalism and conflict resolution—skills critical for Labuan Bajo's tourism sector. This institutional-industry linkage, facilitated by shared foundation ownership, created a seamless bridge absent in many vocational programs (Siagian et al., 2025).

Persistent challenges alongside emerging opportunities

Despite its benefits, implementation challenges emerged. Limited advanced simulation tools at Senja Eatery constrained scenario variety, as observed in repetitive complaint types. Lecturers also expressed the need for more training in facilitating industry-based sessions, aligning with Sutrisno et al. (2020) and Tiarina and Rahmiati (2025).

Conversely, opportunities were substantial. The collaboration enabled immediate industry feedback, fostering job readiness. One lecturer noted: "Students return to class more motivated and apply concepts with real understanding" (Lecturer A). Opportunities for expansion include adapting the model to other ESP courses and deepening partnerships with Labuan Bajo's hospitality network. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the hybrid approach significantly enhances students' complaint-handling competencies while revealing actionable areas for improvement, contributing to more responsive vocational ESP education in tourism-dependent regions.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that integrating the teaching factory model at Senja Eatery with traditional classroom instruction significantly enhances third-semester Diploma III Hospitality students' competencies in English for Handling Complaints at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus. The hybrid approach effectively bridges the longstanding theory-practice gap in vocational ESP education by providing authentic opportunities to apply language skills, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution strategies in real-world hospitality contexts. Findings from observations, performance assessments, and interviews consistently indicate greater improvements in fluency, confidence, professionalism, and adaptability in the teaching factory setting compared to classroom-only environments. Moreover, direct industry feedback confirms the model's strong alignment with the demands of Labuan Bajo's maritime and tourism

sectors, where effective English-mediated complaint handling directly impacts customer satisfaction and business success.

Despite these benefits, challenges such as limited simulation facilities and the need for enhanced lecturer training highlight areas for institutional improvement. However, the seamless collaboration enabled by shared foundation ownership between the polytechnic and Senja Eatery presents valuable opportunities for deeper industry-academia synergy.

To optimize and sustain this hybrid model, the following recommendations are proposed; Provide regular professional development programs for lecturers focused on teaching factory facilitation, authentic scenario design, and objective performance evaluation. Expand and deepen partnerships with hospitality businesses in Labuan Bajo, including joint development of complaint scenarios, guest practitioner sessions, and structured feedback mechanisms. And conduct periodic evaluations of the hybrid integration across ESP courses to ensure ongoing alignment with evolving industry standards and student learning outcomes.

Future research could investigate the long-term impact of this model on graduates' employability through tracer studies or explore its adaptation to other vocational ESP contexts in Indonesia. Ultimately, this study contributes to the advancement of responsive vocational education, producing job-ready graduates equipped to support Indonesia's strategic maritime and tourism industries.

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