

# Negotiating Literacy Culture in South Papua: Literary Activities among Third-Semester English Language Education Students at Universitas Musamus Merauke

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigates the literary activities of third-semester students in the English Education Study Programme at Universitas Musamus Merauke and examines the structural and institutional factors that constrain their engagement with literature. While existing studies on literacy in Indonesian higher education have tended to focus on urban and better-resourced institutional contexts, research addressing the specific conditions of literacy culture in peripheral eastern Indonesian universities, particularly in South Papua, remains scarce. This study contributes to that conversation by situating the problems within the particular social, geographic, and institutional realities of Universitas Musamus Merauke. Located in Merauke, South Papua, a region where access to literary resources remains limited, the study draws on classroom observation of 15 third-semester students, interviews with three secondary teachers from Merauke region, and a systematic library study to collect its data. A fishbone diagram organised around the 5M framework and the USG (Urgency, Seriousness, Growth) method are employed to identify and rank the causal factors behind students' low literary engagement. The findings indicate that a low basic literacy level, including reading fluency deficits among some students, constitutes the most pressing concern, compounded by the absence of a reading culture in the home environment, limited library collections, and the marginalisation of the literary instruction in the school curriculum. The study proposes a set of contextually grounded responses, including classroom-based reading initiatives and community-based literary activities and discusses their potential contribution to character formation and the development of critically engaged graduates in a culturally diverse educational context.

**Keywords:** *literacy culture, literary activities, English Education, Universitas Musamus Merauke, South Papua*

## INTRODUCTION

Literacy in higher education has increasingly become a subject of critical scholarly attention, particularly as universities across the Global South grapple with the tension between institutional expectations and the actual reading practices of their students. The ability to engage meaningfully with written texts, to interpret, analyse, and respond critically to literary works, is no longer treated merely as a precondition for academic success but as a substantive educational outcome in its own right (Macalister & Nation, 2019). Across a range of national contexts, researchers have documented a persistent gap between the literacy demands that universities place on students and the preparation that students actually receive before they arrive (Cummins, 2021;

Dhawan, 2020; Hyland, 2016). This gap is not uniformly distributed: it falls most heavily on students from regions and institutions that have historically received less educational investment, where the infrastructure of literary culture, libraries, bookstores, literary events, reading communities, is thin or absent altogether.

Indonesia presents a particularly instructive case. As the fourth most populous country in the world and one with a remarkably diverse linguistic and literary heritage, Indonesia has made significant strides in expanding access to education over the past two decades. Yet literacy rates and literacy practices remain deeply uneven across the archipelago. The national literacy movement, Gerakan Literasi Nasional, launched through Kemendikbud (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017), represents an ambitious attempt to address this unevenness at the policy level, but implementation has been far more consistent in Java and other western provinces than in the eastern regions of the country. Studies conducted in eastern Indonesian educational contexts have repeatedly found that students at all levels face challenges not only in accessing literary materials but in developing the reading habits and interpretive dispositions that formal education demands (Eri et al., 2021; Pangesti, 2016). These findings point to a structural problem that cannot be resolved through individual effort alone: the conditions for literary culture simply do not exist in the same form in peripheral regions as they do in the country's educational centres.

South Papua occupies a particularly significant position within this landscape. As one of Indonesia's newest provinces, carved out of the former Papua province in 2022, South Papua is still in the process of building its educational infrastructure. Its capital, Merauke, is geographically remote, economically constrained, and culturally rich in ways that formal educational institutions have not always known how to engage with productively. The region's oral literary traditions, sustained across generations by indigenous communities, represent a form of literary culture that is deeply rooted and socially embedded, but that sits uneasily alongside the written literary practices expected in formal schooling and higher education. Several experts have noted that this tension between vernacular and institutional literacy cultures is characteristic of many peripheral Indonesian educational contexts, and that it requires deliberate pedagogical attention rather than the assumption that students will simply assimilate to institutional norms over time (Agustina & Depalina, 2025; Astri & Amalia, 2024; Komalasari et al., 2026).

Within this context, Universitas Musamus Merauke stands as the sole state university serving South Papua and the surrounding region. Its English Education Study Programme carries a particular responsibility: it is charged with producing graduates who will teach English language and literature in schools across the region, and who must therefore possess not only linguistic competence but genuine literary formation. The stakes of getting this right are therefore high, not only for the students themselves but for the generations of school students they will eventually teach. Yet the programme operates under conditions that make literary formation genuinely difficult to achieve. Students arrive from secondary schools where, under the pressures of

curriculum revision and standardised assessment, literary education has been progressively marginalised, a pattern documented across Indonesian educational settings more broadly, though direct evidence from South Papua remains scarce (Agustina & Depalina, 2025; Astri & Amalia, 2024). The university library's literary collection is limited. Organised literary activities on campus are infrequent. And many students are unaware of the digital reading resources that would, at least partially, compensate for these material constraints.

The third semester is the point at which these conditions become most consequential. Students in their third semester have completed the general foundational courses of their programme and are beginning to encounter the more specialised literary and linguistic content that will define the remainder of their undergraduate formation. Their reading habits, their willingness to engage with literary texts, and their sense of themselves as readers are, at this stage, still being shaped. Intervening at this moment, understanding what is happening with students' literary engagement and why, offers the possibility of meaningful change before patterns become entrenched. Despite this, the literary practices and challenges of third-semester English Education students at Universitas Musamus have not been the subject of systematic scholarly investigation. Studies on literacy in Indonesian higher education have tended to focus on universities in Java and other western provinces (Hyland, 2016; Macalister & Nation, 2019), leaving the eastern Indonesian university context, and South Papua in particular, largely unexamined.

This study addresses that gap directly. It examines the literary activities of third-semester students in the English Education Study Programme at Universitas Musamus Merauke, identifies the structural and institutional factors that constrain their engagement with literature, and proposes a set of contextually grounded responses. Specifically, this study is guided by three research questions: (1) What are the literary activities of the third-semester English Education students at Universitas Musamus Merauke? (2) What structural and institutional factors constrain their literary engagement? (3) What contextually grounded responses can realistically address these constraints? The analysis draws on classroom observation conducted over three months, interviews with secondary school teachers from the Merauke region, and a systematic library study of relevant national and international scholarship. Two analytical frameworks structure the findings: a fishbone diagram organised around the 5M framework, which maps the causal factors contributing to students' limited literary engagement, and the USG (Urgency, Seriousness, Growth) method, which ranks those factors according to their relative priority. The novelty of this study lies in its combination of these analytical tools with an ethnographically grounded approach to a higher education context that has received almost no scholarly attention. By making visible the conditions under which literary culture is negotiated at Universitas Musamus, this study contributes to a broader understanding of literacy in peripheral Indonesian universities and offers practical insights for lecturers, programme coordinators, and institutional policymakers working in similar contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Literacy as Social Practice: Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical underpinning of this study draws on the understanding of literacy not as an autonomous, context-free skill but as a socially situated practice shaped by the conditions, relationships, and power structures in which it takes place. This perspective, developed most influentially by Street through his distinction between the autonomous and ideological models of literacy, challenges the assumption that reading and writing competencies can be assessed or cultivated independently of the social contexts in which they are meaningful (Brian V. Street, 1985). The autonomous model, which continues to dominate much standardised assessment and policy discourse, treats literacy as a neutral technical skill that individuals either possess or lack. The ideological model, by contrast, recognises that what counts as literacy, which texts matter, whose reading practices are valued, and who gets to define competence, is always already a question of power. This distinction is not merely theoretical: it has direct implications for how we understand the literacy challenges facing students at Universitas Musamus, where the forms of textual engagement valued by the institution do not always correspond to the literary and oral practices that students bring from their home communities.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital extends this insight by connecting literary competence to the broader social reproduction of advantage and disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu, cultural capital in its embodied form consists of the durable dispositions, tastes, and competencies that individuals acquire through their upbringing and education, and that either facilitate or constrain their participation in institutional fields. Students who arrive at university having grown up in households with books, with parents who read, and with regular exposure to formal literary culture, carry an embodied cultural capital that the institution recognises and rewards. Students from contexts where these conditions are absent must acquire the relevant dispositions from scratch, often without explicit acknowledgement that this is what is being demanded of them. Drawing on Bourdieu in the context of first-generation college students in the United States, several experts demonstrate how these dynamic produces what they call an institutional habitus mismatch: a gap between the cultural dispositions students bring and those the institution implicitly requires (McNamara Horvat & Earl Davis, 2011). While their context differs from South Papua, the structural logic is strikingly similar and offers a productive framework for understanding why third-semester students at Universitas Musamus struggle to engage with literary texts in the ways their programme expects.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning provides a complementary perspective (Vygotsky, 1980). His concept of the zone of proximal development, the space between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance and support, draws attention to the role of mediation in literacy development. Reading, and literary reading in particular, is not a capacity that

develops in isolation: it requires sustained interaction with more experienced readers, access to rich textual environments, and structured opportunities to engage with texts at a level of complexity that is challenging but achievable. Lantolf and Thorne as cited in De Costa, building on Vygotsky's framework in the context of second language acquisition and literary education, argue that sociocultural mediation is especially critical for learners who come from environments where the target literacy practices are not naturally occurring (De Costa, 2007). This is precisely the situation of many students at Universitas Musamus, for whom university literary culture represents a genuinely new social environment rather than a continuation of practices already established at home or at school.

### Literary Activities and Character Formation in Higher Education

The relationship between literary engagement and character formation has generated a substantial body of scholarship, though much of it has focused on secondary rather than tertiary educational contexts. Lickona whose tripartite model of character encompassing moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behaviour remains influential, argues that literature provides an irreplaceable medium for moral education precisely because it engages all three dimensions simultaneously (Lickona, 1992). Literary texts do not merely convey moral propositions; they invite readers into the emotional and imaginative experience of characters facing moral complexity, which is a qualitatively different kind of moral education from direct instruction. More recently, Doll has extended this argument to higher education specifically, contending that literary reading in university contexts cultivates what she calls narrative empathy, the capacity to inhabit perspectives radically different from one's own, and that this capacity is foundational to the ethical formation of professionals in any field (Doll, 2011).

In the Indonesian context, several studies have examined the role of literary texts in character education, though again with a stronger focus on schools than on universities. Novianti demonstrates the potential of the Bildungsroman genre for character education in Indonesian higher education, arguing that the genre's focus on individual formation and moral development makes it particularly well suited to the developmental moment of undergraduate study (Novianti, 2017). Rahmawati and Liliani show through their analysis of Indonesian prose fiction that literary engagement can surface ethical dimensions of experience in ways that conventional academic instruction rarely achieves (Rahmawati & Liliani, 2019). What both studies share, and what the present study takes as a point of departure, is the recognition that these benefits are conditional: they depend on students actually engaging with literary texts in sustained and meaningful ways. When that engagement is minimal or superficial, the character-formative potential of literature remains unrealised.

The critical question, then, is not whether literary activities contribute to character formation but what conditions make such activities possible and sustainable in specific institutional contexts. Here the literature is considerably thinner. Most studies of literary education in higher education assume a baseline of institutional support,

adequate library resources, and a campus culture in which literary engagement is visibly valued, that cannot be assumed in peripheral Indonesian universities. Burne et al. writing about literary reading in second language education, identifies what he calls the conditions of literary possibility: the material, social, and pedagogical arrangements that make meaningful literary engagement achievable for students who do not arrive with it already formed (Siegel, 2018). His framework is useful precisely because it shifts attention from student motivation to institutional responsibility, a shift that is necessary for understanding the situation at Universitas Musamus.

### Literacy in Peripheral Higher Education Contexts

The third strand of relevant literature concerns literacy in higher education contexts that are geographically, economically, or institutionally peripheral, a category that is considerably underrepresented in the scholarship despite its obvious policy significance. The majority of research on literacy in higher education has been conducted in North American, European, and East Asian contexts, with a secondary concentration in urban Indonesian and Javanese settings. This geographical concentration is not neutral: it reflects and reinforces assumptions about what counts as a normal or typical higher education experience that do not travel well to contexts like South Papua.

Within the Indonesian literature, Eri et al. offers one of the few studies that directly addresses literacy in a Papuan educational context, documenting the implementation of a literacy programme in a primary school in Biak and highlighting the particular challenges posed by limited infrastructure, teacher capacity, and community engagement (Eri et al., 2021). While his focus is on primary education rather than higher education, his findings are instructive for understanding the ecosystem in which Universitas Musamus students have been formed. Students who have passed through schools where literacy programmes are under-resourced and inconsistently implemented arrive at university carrying the accumulated effects of that experience. Cummins, in his framework of academic language proficiency, distinguishes between basic interpersonal communicative skills and the deeper cognitive academic language proficiency required for engagement with complex academic and literary texts, and argues that the development of the latter requires years of sustained, supported exposure (Cummins, 2021). When that exposure has been interrupted or inadequate, as is frequently the case in peripheral educational contexts, the gap manifests acutely at the university level.

What is striking about the literature on peripheral higher education is how consistently it identifies the same cluster of structural factors: limited library resources, inadequate teacher preparation, curriculum pressures that marginalise literary content, and insufficient socialisation of students into the reading practices that university study demands. Lillis and Tuck as cited in Hyland, in their critical analysis of academic literacies research, argue that these structural factors are frequently misrecognised as individual student deficits, a misrecognition that leads to interventions focused on

remediation rather than on the institutional changes that would actually address the problem (Hyland, 2016). This study takes that argument seriously. The analytical frameworks employed here, the fishbone diagram and the USG method, are chosen precisely because they direct attention toward structural and institutional causes rather than reducing the problem to questions of student ability or motivation. In doing so, this study hopes to contribute not only to the understanding of literacy culture at Universitas Musamus but to the broader project of developing a more contextually adequate account of literary education in peripheral Indonesian higher education.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design, an approach suited to research questions that seek to describe and interpret phenomena within their natural contexts rather than to test predetermined hypotheses (Creswell, 2018). The choice of this design reflects the exploratory nature of the study's central concerns: rather than measuring outcomes against a fixed standard, the study aims to map the conditions that shape students' literary engagement at Universitas Musamus in their institutional specificity. The emphasis throughout is on understanding the problem structurally and institutionally rather than reducing it to questions of individual student ability or motivation.

### **Participants and Setting**

The study was conducted at Universitas Musamus Merauke, the sole state university serving South Papua. The researchers are a lecturer in the English Education Study Programme at the same institution, a position which facilitated sustained access to participants but that also required reflexive attention to potential observer bias throughout the data collection and analysis process. The primary participants were 15 third-semester students enrolled in the English Education Study Programme, selected through purposive sampling. The number was determined by the size of the intact class available for observation during the study period; purposive sampling of an intact class is a recognised strategy in qualitative classroom research where the aim is to document naturally occurring practices rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015). Their literacy habits and reading dispositions at this stage shape the trajectory of the rest of their undergraduate experience and, ultimately, their readiness to work as language and literature educators. In addition to the student participants, three secondary school teachers from the Merauke region were interviewed to contextualise the observation data and to gain insight into the literary formation that students bring with them to the university. One teacher was drawn from a junior high school and two from senior high schools.

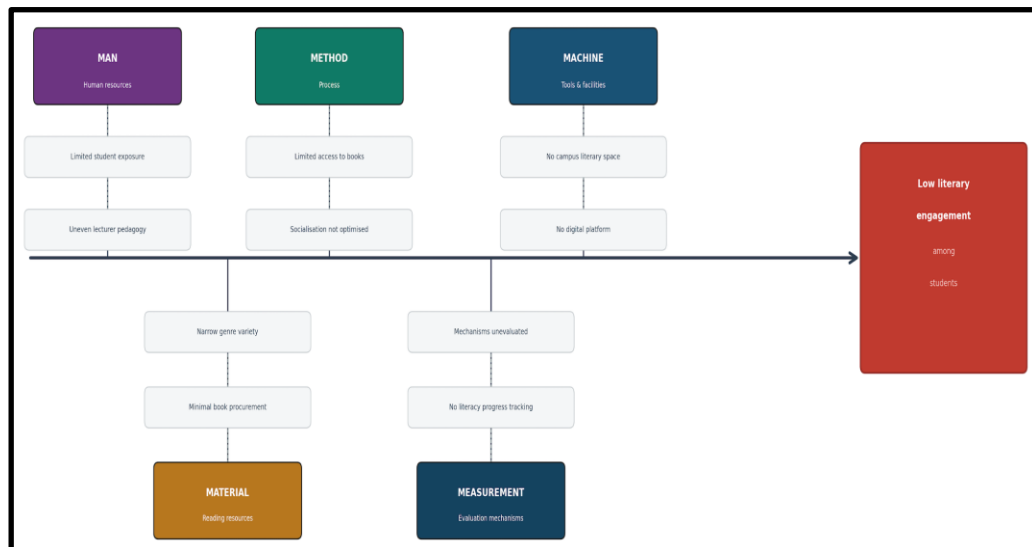
### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through two primary strategies. The first was classroom observation conducted over three months. The observation focused on four specific behavioural indicators: students' reading fluency and engagement during in-class reading activities, the quality and depth of students' participation in literary discussions, students' responses to assigned literary texts as expressed through verbal and written commentary, and evidence of independent reading activity outside formal class sessions. Field notes were structured around these indicators and recorded immediately following each observation session. Audio recordings and photographs were also used to supplement the written field notes where appropriate. The second strategy was a systematic library study involving a review of national and international scholarly sources drawn from accredited journals and relevant institutional documents. The library study served to provide both the theoretical grounding for the study's analytical frameworks and comparative data against which the observation findings could be interpreted. The interviews with the three secondary school teachers were conducted as semi-structured conversations, each exploring the challenges of teaching literary content under the current curriculum and the teachers' assessment of students' literary preparation before entering higher education. Each interview was guided by three main questions: (1) How is literary content currently taught within your school's curriculum? (2) What challenges do you encounter in developing students' reading competence? (3) How would you describe the literary preparation of students who transition from your school to higher education?

### **Data Analysis**

Two analytical frameworks structure the study's findings. The first is the fishbone diagram, organised around the 5M framework: Man or Human Resources, Method or Process, Machine or Tools, Material, and Measurement. Although the fishbone diagram originates in quality management and engineering, it has been adopted across social science and education research as a structured tool for mapping the multiple and interacting causes of a complex problem (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017). Its application here is appropriate because the challenge of low literary engagement is not mono-causal: it arises from the intersection of individual, institutional, and structural factors that the 5M framework is specifically designed to make visible. The fishbone diagram is used as a causal mapping tool that allows the study to identify and organise the factors contributing to students' limited literary engagement across multiple dimensions simultaneously, making visible the systemic nature of the problem and the ways in which causal factors interact and reinforce one another. The causal structure identified through the observation and interview data is represented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1. Fishbone diagram of causal factors contributing to low literary engagement among third-semester English Education students at Universitas Musamus (5M framework)]



The second analytical framework is the USG method, which uses a Likert scale to rank the identified issues according to three criteria: Urgency, referring to the degree to which a factor requires immediate resolution; Seriousness, referring to the consequences that would follow if the factor were left unaddressed; and Growth, referring to the rate at which the problem is likely to worsen without intervention. Each criterion is scored on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates the lowest level (the factor is not urgent, not serious, or not growing) and 5 indicates the highest level (the factor demands immediate attention, would produce severe consequences if unaddressed, or is deteriorating rapidly). Each issue is scored from one to five on each criterion and the combined scores produce a ranked list of priorities that provides the basis for the recommendations developed in the discussion section. Together, the fishbone diagram and the USG method allow the study to move beyond description toward structured, evidence-based prioritisation, ensuring that the analytical frameworks are grounded in empirical observation rather than applied abstractly.

## RESULTS

### Findings from Classroom Observation

The three-month observation period revealed a pattern of literary engagement among the 15 third-semester students that was considerably more constrained than the programme's expectations would suggest. The most striking finding was that a number of students demonstrated difficulty with the basic mechanics of reading itself: several participants were still at the stage of sounding out words syllable by syllable rather than reading fluently, a condition that effectively prevents sustained engagement with literary texts at any meaningful level. This finding was not anticipated at the outset of the study and represents perhaps the most significant single observation of the entire data collection process. It points to a foundational literacy deficit that precedes and underlies all the other constraints identified in this study.

Beyond this, students' engagement with literary texts during class sessions was largely surface-level. When asked to respond to assigned readings, most students tended to summarise content rather than interpret it, and showed considerable difficulty in articulating responses to the thematic, aesthetic, or ethical dimensions of texts. Discussion was hesitant and participation uneven, with a small number of students doing most of the talking while others remained largely silent. Outside classroom hours, independent reading was minimal. When asked informally about their reading habits, most students indicated that they read only when required to do so by coursework, and very few reported seeking out literary works on their own initiative in either Indonesian or English.

The home environment emerged as a compounding factor. Students' accounts of their upbringing consistently described households where books and reading materials were absent or scarce, and where reading was not modelled or encouraged as a regular practice. For many students, the university was the first institutional environment in which they had been asked to engage with literary texts in any sustained or structured way, and they arrived without the embodied reading habits that such engagement requires.

#### Findings from Teacher Interviews

The interviews with three secondary school teachers from the Merauke region shed considerable light on the conditions that precede students' arrival at Universitas Musamus. All three teachers identified the instability of the national curriculum as a central constraint on literary education. The frequency of curriculum revisions in recent years has placed teachers under considerable pressure to cover new content areas and meet new assessment requirements, leaving little room for the kind of sustained, reflective literary engagement that develops genuine reading competence. As one teacher noted, the curriculum changes so often that by the time a teaching approach for literature begins to work, the framework has already shifted. Literary content, never strongly embedded to begin with, has progressively lost ground to more easily assessed areas of the curriculum.

The teaching of reading as a specific skill was identified by all three teachers as similarly marginalised. None of the three schools represented in the interviews had a dedicated reading programme or a structured approach to developing students' reading fluency and comprehension. Reading instruction, where it occurred at all, was largely incidental, embedded within other subject areas rather than treated as a competency that requires deliberate and sustained cultivation. The result, as all three teachers acknowledged, was that many students reached the end of secondary school without having developed the reading stamina or interpretive habits that university study demands.

The library situation at the secondary school level was described as limited across all three schools. Book collections were small, rarely updated, and not well matched to students' interests or to the literary content of the curriculum. None of the schools had

a functioning reading programme or a library that students used regularly for voluntary reading. This picture is consistent with the observation data from the university: students who arrive at Universitas Musamus having had no experience of a well-resourced, actively used library cannot be expected to suddenly become independent literary readers simply by virtue of enrolment.

#### USG Analysis and Issue Ranking

The USG analysis ranks the issues identified through the fishbone diagram and the observation and interview data according to their urgency, seriousness, and growth potential. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. USG Analysis of Literacy Issues among Third-Semester Students at Universitas Musamus

No.	Issue	U	S	G	Score	Rank
1	Low basic literacy level, including reading fluency deficits	5	5	5	15	1
2	Absence of reading culture in the home environment	5	5	4	14	2
3	Limited library collections at secondary school and university level	4	5	4	13	3
4	Marginalisation of literary and reading instruction in the school curriculum	4	5	3	12	4
5	Frequent curriculum revisions disrupting sustained literary pedagogy	4	4	3	11	5
6	Absence of organised literary activities on campus	3	4	4	11	6
7	Limited student awareness of digital reading platforms	3	3	3	9	7

As Table 3 shows, the low basic literacy level among students, including the reading fluency deficits observed in the classroom, ranks as the most urgent and serious issue across all three USG criteria, scoring a combined 15. This is the only issue to receive a maximum score of 5 across urgency, seriousness, and growth, reflecting the fact that without foundational reading fluency, all other interventions aimed at developing literary culture are likely to have limited effect. The absence of a reading culture in the home environment ranks second, acknowledging that the conditions for literacy are shaped long before students arrive at university and cannot be addressed by the institution alone. The remaining issues, while each significant in its own right, represent the institutional and structural layers of the same underlying problem.

#### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study present a picture of literary engagement that is more structurally constrained than might be anticipated even in a peripheral higher education context. The discovery that several third-semester university students are still at the stage of sounding out words syllable by syllable is not simply a pedagogical inconvenience: it is a signal that the conditions for literacy formation have been

inadequate across multiple layers of these students' educational experience, beginning long before they arrived at Universitas Musamus.

### **Foundational Deficit and the Limits of Institutional Intervention**

The most urgent finding, reflected in the USG analysis with a combined score of 15, concerns the basic literacy level of students. As Bourdieu would suggest, students who arrive without reading fluency have not failed individually: they have grown up in environments where the cultural capital necessary for literary engagement was simply not available to them (Bourdieu, 1986). Households without books, communities without libraries, and schools without dedicated reading programmes collectively produce students for whom the written word has never been a natural or comfortable medium. By the time these students reach the third semester of a university literature programme, the embodied disposition toward reading has not been formed, and the institution inherits the consequences.

What this means practically is that the gap between what students can currently do and what the programme expects of them cannot be closed quickly. Vygotsky's framework reminds us that learning depends on the quality of scaffolding received over time, and when that scaffolding has been absent or inconsistent across years of prior schooling, the university faces a task that extends well beyond the delivery of literary content (Vygotsky, 1980). Literary instruction in this context must simultaneously build foundational reading capacity and develop interpretive competence, a double demand that requires both patience and deliberate pedagogical design.

### **The Home Environment and the Pre-institutional Formation of Literacy**

The second-ranked issue in the USG analysis acknowledges a dimension of the problem that no university intervention can fully address: the absence of a reading culture in the home. Many students described upbringings in which books played no role in daily life and where reading was never modelled as a regular practice. For students from these backgrounds, university literary study represents a genuinely new social world rather than a continuation of practices already established elsewhere.

This does not mean that students arrive empty-handed. South Papua's oral literary traditions are rich and culturally embedded, and a literacy pedagogy that ignores those traditions in favour of exclusively written literary forms risks producing graduates who are alienated from both. The more productive approach is to build bridges between the oral literary knowledge students already carry and the written literary practices the programme asks them to develop, treating the former as a genuine foundation rather than a deficit to be overcome.

### **Curriculum Instability and the Marginalisation of Literary Education**

The teacher interview findings illuminate a third layer of the problem at the systemic level. The frequency of curriculum revisions in Indonesian secondary education has created conditions in which sustained literary pedagogy is structurally very difficult to

achieve. Teachers who are perpetually adapting to new frameworks and assessment requirements cannot simultaneously develop deep expertise in literary instruction. As Cummins notes, the development of the deep academic language proficiency required for literary engagement takes years of sustained, supported exposure, and it cannot survive constant disruption of the pedagogical environment in which it is supposed to develop (Cummins, 2021).

This finding points to a systemic tension within Indonesian educational policy that universities in peripheral regions are particularly ill-positioned to resolve on their own. They receive the students most affected by curriculum instability while possessing the fewest resources to address its consequences. The structural problem, as this study's findings make clear, cannot be reduced to individual student deficits: it requires a response at the policy level as well as the institutional one.

### **Responding from Within: Pedagogy, Community, and the Cultivation of Literary Culture**

Against this structural backdrop, the question of what can realistically be done within existing constraints is both urgent and consequential. The findings suggest that no single intervention will suffice and that what is needed is a sustained, multi-layered response operating simultaneously at the level of the classroom, the institution, and the broader community.

At the classroom level, the integration of reading practices and book review activities across literature courses including Introduction to Literature, Drama, Prose, and Poetry has demonstrated that consistent, low-stakes engagement with texts can gradually build the reading stamina and interpretive habits that students lack on arrival. Literary reading develops through repeated practice in a supportive environment rather than through instruction alone, and when students are regularly invited to read, respond, and reflect in a structured way, they begin to develop the relationship with texts that more privileged readers acquire through years of informal exposure. This is slow work, but the observation data from this study suggest it is possible even within the constraints of the current institutional environment.

At the community level, the establishment of book club like Klub Buku Merauke represents a meaningful step toward creating the extracurricular literary culture that the campus itself has not yet been able to provide. By situating the reading community outside the formal university structure, the club creates a space in which literary engagement is voluntary, social, and untethered from the pressure of assessment. Students who struggle most with literary reading as an academic requirement often need to first experience reading as something pleasurable and worthwhile before they can fully inhabit it as a scholarly practice. A community-based reading club offers precisely this kind of low-stakes entry point, and its existence in the specific social and cultural context of South Papua represents a model that other lecturers and institutions in the region could consider adopting.

At the institutional level, the findings point to several measures that would improve the conditions for literary culture at Universitas Musamus without requiring extraordinary resources. The expansion of the library's literary collection, particularly in contemporary Indonesian and English-language literature, would broaden students' reading options considerably. The promotion of digital platforms such as iPerpusnas would extend access further at minimal cost, requiring only a modest investment in student orientation. Regular campus literary events, readings, discussions, and workshops would create visible occasions for literary engagement and signal institutionally that literary culture is valued beyond the requirements of individual courses.

The combination of these responses, committed classroom pedagogy, community-based reading initiatives, and institutional support, cannot resolve the foundational literacy deficits that some students bring from their prior schooling overnight. But the experience documented in this study suggests that meaningful progress is possible within existing constraints, and that sustained effort across these three levels can, over time, create the conditions for a genuine literary culture to take root in South Papua.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the literary activities of third-semester English Education students at Universitas Musamus Merauke, a higher education context in South Papua that has received almost no prior scholarly attention in the literacy literature. By combining classroom observation, teacher interviews, and a systematic library study with the fishbone diagram and USG analytical frameworks, the study has mapped the structural and institutional factors that constrain students' literary engagement and ranked them according to their relative urgency. The findings reveal that the challenges of literary culture in this context run deeper than previously documented in Indonesian higher education research: several university students are still developing basic reading fluency, a condition shaped by the cumulative absence of literacy support in the home, the school, and the broader community. These findings address the gap in existing research by situating literacy challenges within the specific realities of a peripheral eastern Indonesian university rather than the urban and better-resourced contexts that dominate the literature. The novelty of this study lies in its combination of ethnographically grounded observation with structured causal analysis, and in the practical responses it documents, including the integration of reading and book review activities across literature courses and the establishment of book club like Klub Buku Merauke as a community-based reading initiative, as evidence that meaningful progress toward a genuine literary culture in South Papua is both necessary and achievable. Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The small sample size of 15 students from a single institution means that the findings cannot be generalised beyond this specific context. The study did not include student surveys or longitudinal follow-up, and the researcher's dual role as lecturer and observer may have introduced observer bias despite efforts toward reflexivity. Future research with larger samples, multiple institutions, and longer observation periods would help to establish how far the patterns documented here are representative of broader conditions in peripheral Indonesian higher education.

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