Digital Inequality and ELT Challenges in Indonesia's 3T Regions: Rethinking Innovation from the Margins

Franklin Untailawan, M.Pd | Member of APSPBI; (A lecturer in the English Education Study Program at Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Ambon. His research interests include ELT, digital literacy, blended learning, AI in language education, and educational practices in Indonesia's 3T regions)

May 23, 2026 -Opinion and Ideas

Conversations surrounding English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia today are increasingly shaped by discussions of artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and educational innovation. Across conferences, policy forums, and academic spaces, technology is frequently portrayed as a pathway toward more effective, interactive, and inclusive learning environments. Digital platforms, AI-assisted tools, and online learning systems are often presented as indicators of educational progress. Yet, during my research experiences in Maluku Barat Daya, one of Indonesia's outer and geographically isolated regions, I encountered a reality that prompted me to pause and rethink an important question: innovation for whom?

Educational discussions often assume that technology travels evenly across educational landscapes. However, experiences from Indonesia's 3T regions (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged areas) reveal a far more complex reality. In places such as Maluku Barat Daya, distance is not simply geographical. Distance becomes educational. It shapes access, opportunities, and even the everyday possibilities of teaching and learning. Traveling to these regions itself offers an early lesson about inequality. Reaching schools often requires long journeys across islands, dependence on weather conditions, and limited transportation routes. Yet beyond geographical distance lies another challenge—digital distance. Conversations around online learning, AI integration, and educational technologies often sound remarkably distant from the realities teachers negotiate daily. During fieldwork, I found that discussions about blended learning in remote contexts carried meanings different from those commonly found in urban educational narratives. In many policy conversations, blended learning is imagined through stable internet access, digital platforms, and seamless online interaction. However, in remote educational contexts, blended learning frequently becomes a process of adaptation rather than technological integration.

Teachers continuously negotiate between aspirations for innovation and the practical realities surrounding them.

These experiences reminded me of broader discussions surrounding digital inequality. As digital divide scholar Jan van Dijk argues, inequality in digital environments extends far beyond ownership of devices or internet connectivity. Digital inequality also involves differences in skills, access to opportunities, institutional support, and the ability to transform technology into meaningful practices. Digital divides, therefore, are not merely technological; they are profoundly social. Throughout my observations in Maluku Barat Daya, this argument repeatedly became visible. Limited access was only one part of the story. More significant were the unequal opportunities surrounding how educational technologies could realistically be used and sustained. These reflections also brought me back to Paulo Freire's critical understanding of education. Freire reminds us that meaningful education should emerge from lived realities rather than imposed assumptions. Educational practices become transformative when they acknowledge context and begin from people's actual experiences. This perspective feels especially relevant in remote educational settings where teachers continuously negotiate between institutional expectations and local realities. Educational policies often speak the language of innovation, but classrooms at the margins frequently tell more complex stories.

Rethinking Innovation from the Margins

Within ELT, this issue becomes even more visible. Language learning relies heavily upon interaction, communication, exposure, and access to various forms of authentic learning resources. Contemporary ELT increasingly encourages the use of videos, digital platforms, online collaboration, and multimedia learning environments. Yet assumptions embedded within these approaches may unintentionally privilege contexts where infrastructures are already available. What became particularly striking throughout my observations was that teachers in remote contexts should not simply be viewed through narratives of limitation. Such a perspective risks overlooking forms of agency and creativity emerging within constrained environments. Despite facing infrastructural challenges, teachers often demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Rather than waiting for ideal conditions, they adjusted pedagogical practices to fit their realities. Innovation emerged not through technological abundance, but through creativity and contextual responsiveness.

This experience resonates strongly with Michael Fullan's argument that educational change cannot be achieved simply by introducing new technologies into classrooms. Sustainable transformation depends upon people, relationships, and the capacity to adapt innovations within particular contexts. In many ways, educators in Maluku Barat Daya were already practicing this principle. Innovation was not found in sophisticated platforms or advanced systems; it was found in adaptation itself. The growing enthusiasm surrounding artificial intelligence further intensifies these reflections. AI undoubtedly offers exciting possibilities for the future of ELT. Personalized learning systems, automated feedback, and intelligent educational applications are increasingly transforming educational conversations. However, my experiences in Maluku Barat Daya raise an important concern. If educational innovation assumes equal readiness across contexts, technological advancement may unintentionally create new forms of exclusion.

Technology and language education scholar Mark Warschauer similarly reminds us that educational technologies never operate independently from social realities. Their effectiveness is shaped by economic conditions, institutional environments, and broader social structures. Technologies may create opportunities, but unequal contexts can also reproduce unequal educational outcomes. Therefore, introducing more technology alone does not necessarily produce more equitable education. This does not suggest rejecting technological development. Rather, it invites us to reconsider whose experiences shape our understanding of educational progress. Too often, educational innovation is narrated from centers of access and privilege, while voices from geographically peripheral regions remain underrepresented. Perhaps this is why rethinking innovation from the margins becomes increasingly important. Experiences from remote educational settings reveal that transformation is not simply about introducing more advanced technologies. It is equally about listening carefully to context, understanding local realities, and recognizing forms of resilience that often remain invisible. As Indonesia continues pursuing educational transformation, voices from places such as Maluku Barat Daya deserve greater attention. Sometimes, the most meaningful lessons about teaching and innovation do not emerge from places with the fastest internet connections or the newest technologies. Sometimes, they emerge from the margins.

References

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
Fullan, M. (2013). Stratosphere: Integrating Technology, Pedagogy, and Change Knowledge.
Van Dijk, J. (2020). The Digital Divide.
Warschauer, M. (2003). Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide.