

Teaching English in Rural Settings: Challenges and Solutions

Sumi Akter- *Student*

Loleta Malakar- *Student*

Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Dr.Anjali Hans

Associate Professor

Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Abstract

Teaching English Language is deemed challenging and arduous for English Language teachers, particularly when it is done in rural settings where students have minimal English Language exposure. This paper presents the challenges encountered by English Language teachers in teaching English in rural settings and the solutions to overcome the challenges. The findings reveal a myriad of issues and challenges in teaching English in rural settings which have thwarted the development of English Language education in rural settings. A qualitative approach was used in this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Five teachers from three schools who taught English subjects in the classroom were selected for the interview. The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study are the lack of qualified English Language teachers, inadequate facilities, infrastructure, and teaching materials, students' limited competence in English and their negative attitudes towards learning English as well and the lack of parental support are the identified challenges confronted by English Language teachers in teaching English in rural settings. Several pragmatic solutions are suggested to overcome the aforementioned challenges such as providing proper training for English Language teachers, fostering positive attitudes towards teaching English among English Language teachers, improving and upgrading the facilities, infrastructure, and teaching aids as well as promoting effective communication between parents and teachers.

Keywords: English Language, English Teachers, Students, Rural, Challenges, Solutions

Introduction

In today's society, English has become the international language that is being widely used all over the world as it serves as the language of business, language of diplomacy, the language of science and technology, and language of finance and commerce in this era of globalization. Because of the growing importance of English, learning English is essential to explore knowledge globally and to improve one's competencies in the globalizing world. English is perceived to be very crucial not only for future study and employment but also to boost one's confidence and widen their social circle through communication with global citizens (Zefran, 2020).

English is considered one of the most challenging languages to acquire, especially among non-native speakers who utilize English as their second or third language. Many ESL or EFL students lack exposure to the English Language and hence, they struggle to acquire the language (Dasaradhi et al., 2016). It is found that many of them portray negative attitudes towards learning English which is believed to be due to their low proficiency in the language (Halik & Nusrath, 2020).

Therefore, it is undoubtedly true that teaching English among ESL or EFL students is not an easy task for English Language teachers. Apart from the aforementioned issues, there are various hurdles and challenges to be taken into consideration in teaching English among ESL or EFL students. The challenges are even more formidable when it comes to teaching English in rural settings with many other overwhelming obstacles. The lack of facilities and amenities, students' negative attitudes towards learning English, and parents' lack of awareness about the importance of learning English are some of the main issues related to teaching English in rural settings (Febriana et al., 2018). All these issues and challenges have brought about difficulties and struggles in teaching English to students in rural settings among English Language teachers.

This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by English Language teachers and to examine the solutions to overcome the challenges in teaching English in rural settings.

Literature Review

Rural areas are typically described as small and family-oriented, with most, if not all, members of the community knowing one another (Morton et al., 2018 in Stone & Évora, 2021). According to The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) and the United States Census Bureau, the following guidelines for rural settings have been established: fringe is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, distance is more than 5 miles but less than 25 miles from an urbanized area, and remote is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area. Although these principles are meant to make cross-regional comparisons easier, they also pose obstacles for educators and researchers. For example, depending on a school's proximity to a densely populated area, all three classifications may coexist inside a single school district (Coady, 2020).

English Language or ESL/EFL education has always been a concerning matter in rural settings in many countries all over the world because it has not been properly implemented and developed in schools or educational institutions situated in rural areas. According to Coady (2019), the term "rurality" is believed to be related to geographical features, population density, and access to social services. The impoverished conditions of the school buildings and facilities such as poor lighting, inadequate heating or cooling as well as damaged floors and roofs are the adversities exhibited in many schools or educational institutions in rural settings, resulting from ignorance, negligence, and insufficient funding (Marwan, Sumintono & Mislan, 2008). This is supported by Paul & Kumari (2017) who stated the significance of fostering a conducive learning environment to promote physical, social, mental, and emotional well-being among the students.

Teaching English in rural settings is a challenging task, especially for English Language teachers. As mentioned above, one of the major and persistent issues encountered by English Language teachers and students in rural settings is the lack of a conducive and supportive learning environment due to the poor conditions of the school buildings and facilities. (Martina, 2019). This is in agreement with the findings by Omodan (2020) who has identified the lack of internet access as one of the issues encountered in teaching and learning in rural schools in Malaysia which leads to disruption of the learning process among rural students. Without internet access, English Language teachers claimed that they could not use interesting online teaching and learning materials such as videos and pictures in their classrooms (Martiana, 2019). However, it is found that the ICT facilities in rural schools are either insufficient, poorly maintained, or damaged, based on a study done by (Endriyati et al., 2019). Thus, English Language teachers and students in rural schools rarely have the chance to enjoy the benefits of these ICT facilities which slackens teachers' motivation to teach and students' motivation to learn.

Zulkefly & Razali (2019) stated that rural students are aware of the importance of the English Language but they do not see the immediate need to use the language to communicate with others, resulting in negative attitudes and ignorance toward the acquisition of the language. This is also supported by Mat & Yunus (2014) who found out that students in rural schools respond positively towards learning English which portrays their cognizance towards the importance of the English Language. However, they are found to be quite anxious and fearful of learning the language due to the lack of motivation and efforts in acquiring the language as well as their negative perceptions towards learning the language. Therefore, it is significant for English Language teachers to understand the reasons that give rise to students' negative perceptions towards learning English and have good communication with them to slowly change their perceptions towards learning English (Zulkefly & Razali, 2019).

Apart from the above-mentioned issues, Aziz, Swanto & and Azhar (2019) stated that students' family background, socioeconomic status, and also the status of English Language in their area lead to the result of poor English among rural students. Nonetheless, most parents in rural areas are ignorant of English Language learning as the majority of them are not highly educated and they do not see the importance of learning the language (Shahnaz & Ghandana, 2021). Hossain (2016) further elaborated that many students who live in poverty are found to perform badly in English because their parents are financially burdened to provide their children with suitable educational resources or send them to private tuition. This has caused students to rely very much on their school English Language teachers which leads to stress among the teachers. Based on the study carried out by Han & and Mahzoun (2021), it is found that parents' negative attitudes towards the teachers can build dissatisfaction and demotivation among the teachers.

Methodology

According to Bogdan and Taylor, a qualitative technique is a research strategy that generates descriptive data from persons in the form of written or spoken words and observable behavior. In qualitative research, numerous ways to examine natural environments can be employed to achieve research aims.

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. The participants selected for this study were five Bangladeshi teachers who used literary texts in ESL classrooms. These participants have five to seven years of teaching experience in three different government schools. These schools were on three sides of a union under a district. The semi-structured interview was conducted online with open-ended questions to collect the data. It took five weeks to take the interview individually which was in Bangladesh. This data was analysed using thematic analysis to answer the research question.

Findings and Discussion

Lack of qualified English Language Teachers

The shortage of English Language teachers has always been a persistent problem faced in English Language education in rural schools. Many English Language teachers are reluctant to teach in rural schools due to several reasons such as low welfare (Febriana et al., 2018) and being underpaid (Salahuddin et al., 2013). The lack of English Language teachers in rural schools has caused teachers who are not experts in English to resort to teaching English (Milon, 2016; Febriana et al., 2018). One of the main obstacles to insufficient professional development among English Language teachers is the inability to use effective teaching strategies, methods, or approaches in teaching English to rural students which is liable for rural students' limited competence in English Language (Milon, 2016; Hossain, 2016). In a study conducted by Belatrech (2018), novice English teachers claimed that the training provided during their undergraduate studies was not helpful enough for them to incorporate various teaching pedagogies in supporting their teaching of English in rural schools. In addition, issues associated with classroom management also arise from the lack of English teachers' training (Sharmin, 2019; Kuwat & Ghazali, 2018; Hossain, 2016).

Inadequate Facilities, Infrastructure, and Teaching Materials

English Language education in rural settings is characterized as disadvantaged due to inadequate facilities and infrastructure to support the teaching and learning of the English Language (Milon, 2016; Halik & Nusrath, 2020). According to Martiana (2019), some rural schools are supplied with basic facilities and equipment but they cannot be fully utilized given the challenges in accessing electricity. The shortage of teaching aids and instructional materials has posed a great challenge to enhancing the process of English Language teaching and learning. For example, the shortage of English books and materials (Hossain, 2016; Martiana, 2019). The lack of support from schools and administrators in providing necessary teaching resources has also significantly slackened English Language teachers' motivation to teach English and affected the efficiency and efficacy of English Language education in rural settings (Aziz et al., 2019).

Students' Limited Competence in English

The issue of students' limited competence in English is prevalent in rural areas which is inevitably related to minimal language exposure (Hossain, 2016) and this would lead to countless issues and challenges in teaching English.

The English Language is only used during English lessons, but not outside the classroom, and thus, rural students rarely get the opportunities to practice the language in their daily lives which results in a low level of English proficiency among rural students (Masturi et al., 2022). Martiana (2019) has also found that students are poor at mastering the four English Language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Besides that, students' limited vocabulary mastery has rendered them to difficulties in understanding English Language (Kuwat & Ghozali, 2018; Endriyati et al., 2019). Moreover, rural students are also found to have problems in pronouncing and memorizing English vocabulary (Martiana, 2019).

Students' Negative Attitudes towards Learning English

The issue of rural students' negative attitudes towards English Language learning has become a concerning matter that contributes to major challenges in teaching English to them. Rural students perceive English to be a dull, boring, difficult, challenging, and trivial subject in school and hence, they are not interested and motivated to imbibe the language which leads to low English quality among rural students (Febriana et al., 2018; Cheng et al., 2016; Halik & Nusrath, 2020).

Lack of parental support

There has also been a great concern over the lack of parental support in English Language education in rural areas. Parents are found to be financially burdened to provide their children with learning resources and educational materials which hinders the learning of English (Endriyati et al., 2019; Masturi et al., 2022). Owing to poor economic conditions in many rural families, many parents do not have enough time and motivation to supervise their children's learning due to prolonged hours of working (Khulel, 2021; Masturi et al., 2022).

Solutions to Overcome Challenges in Teaching English in Rural Settings

Proper Training for English Language Teachers

Based on previous studies, the shortage of English Language teachers in rural settings has been a prevalent issue and thus, it is of utmost importance to recruit more English teachers to reduce the teacher-student ratio in rural schools (Salahuddin et al., 2013). The training programs should aim to increase the ability of English Language teachers to prepare English learning materials, integrate suitable teaching pedagogies to deliver English learning content, as well as assess and evaluate students (Milon, 2016; Salahuddin et al., 2013). Besides that, the need to conduct training or workshops about Communicative Language Teaching is also emphasized in a study done by Milon (2016).

Foster Positive Attitudes among English Language Teachers

One of the crucial factors affecting English Language education in rural schools is the attitudes of the English Language teachers. It is stated in one of the studies by Saiful & Triyono (2018) that English Language teachers should be creative and innovative in preparing English learning materials and conducting classroom activities, patient in dealing with the unfavorable physical environment of rural schools as well as firm in dealing with appalling attitudes of rural students in learning English. Other than that, many other interesting ways of helping and engaging students in English lessons have been suggested by Milon (2016): the use of translation methods, remedial classes, and poetry recitals.

Improve and Upgrade Facilities, Infrastructure, and Teaching Aids

Noting that rural schools are in dire need of proper facilities, infrastructure, and teaching resources. It is significant to provide equal access to learning resources and facilities like what has been given to the urban or town schools (Halik & Nusrath, 2020) to facilitate English Language learning and narrow the rural-urban gaps in terms of English Language literacy and achievement.

That, Endriyati et al (2019) suggested rural schools propose to the Local Education Department to request suitable school facilities and equipment to enhance teaching and learning in rural settings. Also, a variety of teaching aids and resources such as ICT and visual aids should be utilized in English classrooms to create more interesting and effective English lessons (Khalid, 2017).

Promote Effective Communication between Parents and Teachers

Cultivating effective communication between parents and teachers is undeniably imperative in developing English Language education among students in rural areas (Endriyati et al., 2019; Sharmin, 2019). English Language teachers must build a rapport with parents to communicate with them about the learning progress of their children, and ongoing issues that may affect their learning and also to discuss ways to help them to improve their learning (Lekli & Kaloti, 2015). Overall, effective parent-teacher communication can foster positive parent-teacher relationships which is believed to be able to improve English Language education in rural schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching English in rural settings is deemed a great challenge among English Language teachers. This study explored the challenges encountered by English Language teachers while teaching English in rural settings as well as the solutions to overcome the challenges encountered.

All the challenges and issues have thwarted the development of English Language education in rural settings. Some recommendations are given to cope with the existing problems encountered in teaching English in rural settings. It is important to ensure a sufficient number of English Language teachers teaching in rural settings to fill the shortage of English Language teachers in rural settings. It is even more crucial to make sure that they are experienced, professional, and well-trained enough to cater quality English Language education to the students. Hence, the recruitment of more English teachers and the availability of upskilling training or professional development programs are essential for the improvement of English Language teaching in rural settings. Apart from developing pedagogical skills in teaching English, English teachers' positive attitudes toward teaching English among rural students should also be cultivated to foster positive teacher-student relationships. Parents should not forget their responsibilities towards the children's education and therefore, they should communicate effectively with the children's English teachers to monitor and keep track of their children's English learning progress. Adequate facilities, teaching aids, and learning resources should be provided to rural schools to facilitate English Language teaching and to give opportunities for students to assess various kinds of English learning experiences.

References

- Aziz, A. A. A., Swanto, S., & Azhar, S. B. H. J. (2019). *Coping with stress: Exploring the lived experiences of English teachers who persist in Malaysian rural schools*. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(3), 506–514. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i3.15249>.
- Belatrech, S-K. H. (2018). *Novice EFL Teachers' Challenges in Mostaganem Rural Areas*. *Social Sciences*, 7(3), 125. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ss.20180703.13>.
- Coady, M. R. (2019). "They Just Don't Know Who We Are": Rural English Learner Teacher Education. *The TESOL Encyclopaedia of English Language Teaching*, January, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0979>.
- Endriyati, Prabowo, Abasa, & Akmal. (2019). *Challenges in teaching English at rural and urban schools and their solutions*. *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 8(10), 3406–3410.
- Febriana, M., Nurkamto, J., Rochsantiningih, D., & Muhtia, A. (2018). *Teaching in Rural Indonesian Schools: Teachers' Challenges*. *International Journal of Language Teaching and Education*, 2(2), 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.22437/ijolte.v2i2.5002>.
- Halik, A., & Nusrath, R. (2020). *Challenges Faced by ESL Teachers in Teaching English to the Students in Rural Schools: A Study Based on Five Rural Schools in the Kinniya Education Zone, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications (IJSRP)*, 10(11), 358–366. <https://doi.org/10.29322/ij srp.10.11.2020.p10744>
- Han, T., & Mahzoun, Z. (2021). *Demotivating Factors on Foreign EFL Teachers: A Case Study in Private School in Turkey*. *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal*, 21(1), 107–115. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1296271&site=ehost-live%0Ahttps://readingmatrix.com/files/24-8042rs33.pdf>.
- Hossain, M. (2016). *English Language Teaching in Rural Areas: A Scenario and Problems and Prospects in Context of Bangladesh*. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.7n.3p.1>.
- Khalid, F. S. (2017). *Exploring English Language Teachers' Challenges and Coping Strategies in Teaching Slow Learners in Inclusive Education Programmes*. *Iium Journal of Educational Studies*, 5(2), 39–53.
- Lekli, L., & Kaloti, E. (2015). *Building Parent-Teacher Partnerships as an Effective Means of Fostering Pupils' Success*. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(1), 39–40.
- Masturi, S. Z., Kosnin, A. binti M., & Zainudin, N. F. binti. (2022). *The Barriers in Teaching English Skilla Encountered by Rural-area Preschool Teachers: A Preliminary Study*. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(2), 4696–4703.
- Omodan, B. I. (2020). *The vindication of decoloniality and the reality of COVID-19 as an emergency of unknown in rural universities*. *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2020(Special Issue), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.17583/RISE.2020.5495>.
- Paul, M. M., & Kumari, D. R. (2017). *Physical conditions of a classroom–Dynamic elements promoting mental health and conducive learning in students*. *International Journal of Applied Social Science*, 4(September), 211–215.

- Shahnaz, M., & Gandana, I. S. S. (2021). Teaching English in a Rural School: How the Pandemic Affects Teachers' Beliefs and Practices. 546(Conaplin 2020), 334–340.*
- Sharmin, M. (2019). Teaching English in Rural Schools: A Case Study of Three Primary Schools in Bangladesh. BRAC University, April, 65.*
- Zefran, M. (2020). Perceived Importance of English and Its Connection to Learning Motivation Perceived Importance of English and Its Connection to Learning Motivation and Foreign Language Anxiety. December. <https://doi.org/10.26493/978-961-7055-36-8.77-93>.*