

Teacher's Challenges and Strategies in Teaching English in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges and strategies employed by English teachers in rural junior high schools in Tanjung Jabung Timur, Indonesia, particularly in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. As English becomes increasingly important as a global lingua franca, its role as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia's education system is crucial. The research utilized a qualitative, phenomenological design, focusing on three schools: SMPN 9 Tanjung Jabung Timur, SMPN 2 Tanjung Jabung Timur, and MTsN 02 Tanjung Jabung Timur. Researchers collected data through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with English teachers, ensuring data reliability using trustworthiness techniques. Researchers used the Miles and Huberman approach for data analysis, uncovering patterns and strategies employed by teachers in rural settings. Professional development remains a significant challenge, with formal training opportunities being scarce. Teachers often use self-directed learning, informal networks, and online resources to meet professional demands. The study calls for more targeted interventions to support rural teachers, foster greater parental involvement, and improve educational infrastructure. Recommendations emphasize reducing disparities between rural and urban education to create a more inclusive and equitable system in Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global lingua franca, serving as a key medium for communication, education, and commerce worldwide. In Indonesia, English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) and plays a vital role in preparing students for global engagement. However, unlike in some former colonies where English has become a second language, in Indonesia, it remains largely confined to formal education settings. The use of English in everyday communication is limited, particularly in rural areas, where exposure to the language is minimal, leading to significant challenges in its acquisition and practical use.

Historically, the spread of English worldwide has been attributed to British colonialism, with the language established as a symbol of economic and cultural power. Lauder (2008) noted that "the historical context of worldwide dominance by the British colonial government intricately links the global lingua franca's ubiquity," with English proficiency seen as a valuable skill in many regions. However, Indonesia, which the British did not directly colonize, has maintained its native languages, relegating English to a foreign language status. This lack of direct colonial influence has resulted in a slower integration of English into daily life, particularly in remote and rural areas.

Recognizing the growing need for English proficiency in the globalized world, the Indonesian government has introduced several educational reforms aimed at improving English language education. The most recent of these is the "Kurikulum Merdeka," a flexible curriculum that provides greater autonomy to schools and educators. This curriculum emphasizes a more contextual and relevant approach to education, focusing on literacy, numeracy, and character development through the "Profile of Pancasila Students," as well as encouraging the use of technology in the learning process. It aims to create adaptive, innovative learning environments that can better prepare students for the demands of the 21st century.

However, despite the promising framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka, its implementation in rural schools remains a significant challenge. Teachers in rural areas face numerous barriers, including language difficulties due to local dialects, limited resource access, and inadequate infrastructure. Research has shown that these schools often lack the necessary facilities to support effective English language teaching. For example, Febriana et al. (2018) found that "rural schools in Indonesia confront distinct challenges, including limited learning resources, insufficient classroom equipment, and minimal support from school leadership." These limitations hinder teachers' ability to provide engaging and practical lessons, further exacerbating students' difficulties in acquiring English.

Another critical issue is the lack of student motivation and engagement in learning English in rural areas. Due to the perceived lack of practical value of English daily, students often view it as an irrelevant subject. It is highlighted by Wang (2006), as cited in Febriana et al. (2018), that "in rural areas, English is commonly perceived as a foreign language with limited immediate utility in daily life," resulting in low levels of enthusiasm and commitment among students. The lack of motivation is further compounded by the limited

opportunities for students to practice English outside the classroom, making the development of confidence in using the language more difficult.

The role of parents in supporting their children's English education is often minimal in rural areas. Many parents prioritize subjects like reading, writing, and mathematics over English, viewing it as less important for their children's future prospects. As Holguin and Morales (2015) point out, "there is a pressing need to enhance parental support for English language learning, as many parents focus on fundamental skills at the expense of English proficiency." Without parental encouragement and involvement, students may lack the motivation and resources to excel in learning English.

These challenges include rural teachers often receiving limited professional development opportunities, further complicating their ability to teach English effectively. While the Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes the importance of teacher training and mentorship, the reality in rural areas is that many teachers must rely on self-directed learning or informal networks for professional growth. Formal training programs are often unavailable or inaccessible due to the geographic isolation of rural schools. According to Boy Jon et al. (2021), "teachers frequently rely on online resources and self-education to maintain their teaching standards," highlighting the need for more structured and accessible professional development programs for rural educators.

The transition from the previous national curriculum (Curriculum 13) to the Kurikulum Merdeka presents both challenges and opportunities for English language education in rural Indonesia. While the new curriculum offers greater flexibility and the potential for more innovative teaching methods, it also places significant demands on teachers, particularly those in resource-constrained environments. The implementation of this curriculum in rural schools, where facilities, resources, and support systems are often limited, represents a critical area of concern.

This study explores the unique challenges English teachers face in rural areas, specifically focusing on Tanjung Jabung Timur, Indonesia. By examining the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka in these settings, the research seeks to identify the strategies teachers employ to overcome these obstacles and provide recommendations for improving the quality of English education in rural schools. The teacher must address these challenges to ensure that rural students have equitable access to quality education and are not left behind in the country's efforts to improve English proficiency and prepare students for global citizenship.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on rural education in Indonesia by highlighting the difficulties English teachers face in remote areas and providing insights into how they can address these challenges within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka. Doing so aims to inform future policy decisions and support efforts to bridge the educational gap between rural and urban schools in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education in Rural Areas

Several distinct challenges shape the educational context in rural and urban areas. Rural schools are often newly established, with insufficient facilities and resources, leading to inadequate learning conditions. Febriana et al. (2018) emphasize that rural schools in Indonesia frequently lack essential infrastructure, resulting in teacher-centered approaches to instruction. Parental emphasis on education also differs. Rahayu (2016) points out that many rural parents do not prioritize formal education for their children, negatively impacting students' motivation and academic performance. The absence of a competitive educational environment, commonly found in urban areas, further compounds this issue, leading to lower student engagement and achievement levels. Addressing these disparities requires tailored interventions and support to improve educational outcomes in rural regions.

Challenges in Teaching English in Rural Areas

Rural educators face various obstacles in teaching English, including inadequate infrastructure and limited access to essential resources. Shikalepo (2020) highlights time constraints, a lack of proper English instruction materials, and deficient teaching resources as significant barriers. The challenge is further complicated by insufficient teacher training, as noted by Hellsten et al. (2011), which leaves teachers ill-prepared to navigate the unique difficulties of rural education. Cheung (2021) suggests holistic reforms are necessary to enhance teacher training across preservice, induction, and in-service stages. The scarcity of professional development opportunities for rural teachers and logistical issues like poor internet connectivity exacerbate these challenges. Moreover, students in rural areas often show little interest in learning, particularly in English, further hampering classroom engagement. Lastly, as discussed by UNICEF (2020), a lack of parental involvement in education puts an additional burden on teachers to motivate and guide students with little support from home.

Strategies Employed by Teachers to Overcome Challenges

Despite the obstacles, rural teachers employ innovative strategies to address these challenges. Anggela et al. (2024) discuss how teachers use personal funds to enhance lessons by purchasing supplementary materials and bringing personal equipment, such as Bluetooth speakers, to create more engaging learning environments. Motivating students is another critical strategy, where teachers use stories of successful individuals like Maudy Ayunda to inspire students and foster a positive learning environment. Professional development remains a focus, even with logistical constraints, as teachers participate in online training whenever possible, demonstrating their commitment to improving their teaching skills. Effective communication with parents is also crucial. Teachers emphasize the importance of regular dialogue with parents to address student issues, fostering a collaborative approach to education and creating a supportive environment at both home and school. These strategies highlight the resourcefulness and dedication of rural educators in overcoming the challenges of teaching English.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the challenges and strategies of English teachers in rural junior high schools in Tanjung Jabung Timur. The phenomenological method allows an in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. Researchers collected the data through interviews, classroom observations, and observation checklists to understand the issues faced by teachers in rural settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals several key challenges and adaptive strategies among English teachers in rural junior high schools in Tanjung Jabung Timur. Teachers face significant difficulties due to inadequate technological resources and unreliable internet connectivity, severely impacting their ability to deliver effective instruction. Many schools lack essential equipment such as projectors and LCD screens, leading teachers to share resources and adapt their lesson plans based on availability. This shortage not only increases their preparation workload but also hinders the quality of education, aligning with existing literature that highlights infrastructural deficiencies as a significant barrier to effective teaching in rural settings (Anggela et al., 2024; Shikalepo, 2020; Endriyati et al., 2019).

Another challenge identified is the misalignment between textbooks and the Kurikulum Merdeka teaching modules, confusing students and requiring teachers to seek additional resources. This issue underscores the need for better alignment between educational materials and curriculum requirements, as previously noted in studies about pedagogical disparities (Wang, 2006) and the importance of curricular realignments (Cheung, 2021). Furthermore, teachers struggle with implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka due to limited understanding and insufficient formal training, resulting in a reliance on traditional teaching methods. This finding supports existing literature emphasizing the need for comprehensive professional development programs to aid teachers in adapting to new curricula (Hellsten et al., 2011; Shikalepo, 2020; Saiful & Triyono, 2018).

Engaging parents and the community presents another significant challenge. The predominantly agricultural occupation of parents limits their ability to support their children's education, and communication barriers between schools and families further complicate efforts to increase parental involvement. This challenge of limited parental support due to occupational constraints and communication issues aligns with previous findings on the impact of parental involvement and community support in rural education (Anggela et al., 2024; UNICEF Indonesia, 2016, 2020). Teachers' creative approaches to overcoming these challenges include using interactive methods such as games, role-plays, and real-life examples and leveraging local materials and technology to make lessons more relevant. These strategies reflect the literature's support for interactive and contextually relevant teaching methods (Agnihotri & Ngorosha, 2018; Afriani et al., 2021).

Despite limited formal training opportunities, teachers engage in self-directed learning through online resources, peer support, and professional forums like KKG and MGMP. This approach aligns with the challenges noted in previous studies about rural educators' professional development (Anggela et al., 2024; Saiful & Triyono, 2018). The study highlights how teachers' creative adaptations and resourcefulness help address immediate educational challenges. Still, it also underscores the need for structured support from academic institutions and government bodies to improve the quality of instruction in rural settings.

The study provides valuable insights into the complexities of teaching English in rural junior high schools, emphasizing the importance of addressing infrastructural gaps, aligning educational materials with curricula, enhancing teacher training, and improving parental involvement. However, the findings are limited by the small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and the focus on teachers' perspectives, potentially overlooking the experiences of students, parents, and other stakeholders. The study's cross-sectional nature captures a specific moment in time, and future research could benefit from a broader scope and consideration of additional factors impacting rural education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research underscores the remarkable adaptability and innovation demonstrated by rural English teachers in Tanjung Jabung Timur as they navigate the challenges posed by limited resources and constrained professional development opportunities. Despite these obstacles, educators have successfully employed interactive and practical teaching methods, such as group discussions, presentations, games, drama, and role-plays, to foster engaging and dynamic learning environments. These strategies have proven effective in enhancing student involvement and deepening their understanding of English concepts, showcasing the teachers' commitment to delivering high-quality education in rural settings where traditional methods may fall short.

The study also highlights significant gaps in formal professional development for rural teachers. With limited access to structured training programs, educators often resort to self-directed learning and informal networks to advance their skills. This proactive approach, evidenced by their utilization of online resources, participation in local professional groups, and pursuit of certification programs, reflects their dedication to maintaining high teaching standards and improving their practices despite systemic limitations.

FURTHER STUDY

This study has provided valuable insights into English teachers' challenges and adaptive strategies in rural junior high schools in Tanjung Jabung Timur. However, several areas require further exploration to deepen our understanding of rural education dynamics. Firstly, future research could focus on the direct impact of inadequate technological resources on student learning outcomes. While this study highlights teachers' difficulties with limited access to technology, additional research is needed to understand how these constraints affect students' English language acquisition, engagement, and overall academic

performance. Studies could explore alternative resources available to students outside of school, such as community-based learning tools, and how these could mitigate the effects of poor infrastructure.

Another potential area for further investigation is the misalignment between textbooks and the Kurikulum Merdeka. Future studies could assess the effectiveness of current educational materials and examine the process of aligning them more closely with curriculum requirements. Comparative research between rural and urban educational settings would also offer insights into how resource disparities affect curriculum implementation and student outcomes. Such studies could inform policy changes that ensure educational materials are more contextually relevant and accessible to rural students, addressing one of the critical issues identified in this study.

Additionally, the role of parental involvement and community engagement in rural education warrants deeper exploration. Future studies could investigate the cultural and socioeconomic factors that limit or support parental involvement in children's education, particularly in agricultural communities. Longitudinal research could assess the long-term effectiveness of strategies to increase parental and community engagement in rural schools. Moreover, obtaining data from parents and community members would provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities in fostering a collaborative educational environment.

Professional development for rural teachers is another area that requires further attention. While this study highlights the reliance on self-directed learning, future research could examine the long-term effectiveness of online training, peer learning, and professional forums such as KKG and MGMP in improving teaching practices. Investigating the potential for more formalized support systems, such as government-sponsored training programs, would also provide valuable insights into how to enhance rural teachers' professional growth and their ability to implement the Kurikulum Merdeka more effectively.

Lastly, future research should incorporate perspectives beyond those of teachers, including students, parents, administrators, and policymakers. A more comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach would provide a fuller understanding of the educational ecosystem in rural areas. This comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach would enable the identification of additional factors influencing rural education and inform targeted interventions to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning in these contexts.

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