

## Teachers' Challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners in Rural Area

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### ABSTRACT

It is believed that rural education has unique challenges compared to urban and suburban areas, particularly in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Problems that often occur are related to educational inequality for those who live in rural areas, such as unqualified teachers, limited educational facilities, or lack of parental support. This study aims to identify the challenges faced by English teachers and their strategies in teaching English to young students in rural areas. This qualitative research used direct observation in the classroom and interviews with the English teacher at an elementary school in Ponorogo. The findings showed that (1) learning English in remote areas was constrained by the status of English as a local content that created less supportive conditions for teachers to teach English; (2) most of the teachers came from non-English educational backgrounds, which affected their competence; (3) the learning curriculum was not in accordance with the existing learning conditions; and (4) the socioeconomic status of parents had a significant effect on students' motivation and achievement in learning English. Therefore, English teachers in rural areas need to use various strategies to address the mentioned problems.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is important to begin teaching English at a young age. According to Cameron (2018), beginning to learn a foreign language at a younger age benefits some areas of language skills, such as listening comprehension and pronunciation. Furthermore, Ball & Feiman (2014) explain that students who begin their language learning in primary school have a better chance of achieving a high level of language proficiency than those who begin in secondary school. Teaching English to elementary school students

is a wise decision because elementary school students have a golden age and a critical period which make them learn anything easily. Their brains are still flexible at this age, allowing them to learn anything, including languages. Aside from that, children's attitudes toward other languages and cultures are open, which help them learn more about language.

Language development is an important development for children because it allows them to identify themselves as well as interact and cooperate with others (Novan and Wiyani, 2014). Language development refers to the processes that control the human left brain, which is responsible for language development and speaking (Rachmajanti, 2018). Speaking is a language skill that develops in the lives of children (Nurjanah & Anggraini, 2020). Similarly, Adhani's (2012) research findings highlight the significance of language in everyday life in particular. Improving children's language development from an early age is critical for children because language development occurs very quickly during the golden age. According to Mashburn (2018), language development is critical between the ages of 0 and 6 years. And research (Zubaidah, 2014) shows that it is critical to develop children's language skills at a young age, because this is when children can develop all of their skills and abilities. The ability of children to communicate through the interactions they have at each stage of their development. According to Al-Harbi (2019), children create their own language based on the language of the adults around them.

The most sensitive period in a person's life to language is between the ages of birth and six years (Sujiyono, 2012). In relation to this, Harmanto (2013) mentions that a child's language development improves between the ages of 4-6 years. Moreover, Pinter (2016) spotlights several reasons why children can benefit from learning a foreign language when teaching English to young learners. It can help with the development of children's basic communication skills in the language. Children's communication skills must be honed as early as possible. Learning English also increases children's enjoyment and motivation to learn a language, especially if it is done in a fun way. Furthermore, children can explore learning about other cultures and develop their cognitive skills as well as their metalinguistics according to their needs. Learning a language entails learning about culture as well. Another reason for the popularity of teaching English to young learners is that it is today's lingua franca, which means the common language used for communication between two people whose languages are not the same (Yuwono & Harbon, 2013). As a result, parents want their children to learn English as soon as possible to help them in their academic future because English will be an important part of the future.

Therefore, language development is one of the basic abilities that every child must have because language is needed in a society to communicate with the environment. Children under the age of six years old learn language through interactions with other children, one of which occurs in the classroom. teachers' school Language serves an important function in human life as a means of social communication. However, communication can be hampered due to language differences between countries, necessitating the use of a unifying language or an international language understood by all, namely English. English is a global language that is widely taught and understood by many developed countries around the world. According to Suyanto (2018), the role of English as a foreign language is important in Indonesia. Similarly, Ngadimun (2019) argues that an increasing number of people worldwide are attempting to learn English. Dörnyei (2015) even supports that English is an international language that is widely taught and mastered by many developed countries around the world.

It is possible to conclude that a country that understands English has entered the globalization era and is capable of establishing various types of international relations with other countries. This is why more and more people are attempting to learn English well in order to compete globally and to introduce English to children at a young age. Every child experiences language and concept development quickly as they grow older, especially if it is supported by the introduction of English at a young age so that it is useful for them when they grow up and compete with the rest of the world. Therefore, since 1994, several schools in Indonesia have implemented teaching English to young

students (TEYL) (Supriyanti, 2018). However, there are several factors that affect different levels of English achievement between urban and rural areas. Children in urban areas benefit from high-quality facilities where they have access to nearly all of the best education available, quality teachers, and supportive parents. Learning in the city makes it easier to gain access to a more comprehensive education, including learning support media, books, projectors, teaching aids for English learning of school quality, and a more appropriate learning curriculum. Teachers are more competent to teach because, in addition to being supported by adequate equipment, they also have qualifications to teach more competently, such as having an English learning background or being qualified in the field being taught. Parents also fulfill in terms of supporting factors, such as parents who are able to support learning English both at home and at school, and many parents who understand the importance of learning English from an early age and are also supported by adequate parental finance.

On the other hand, underprivileged children, particularly those living in rural areas, do not have adequate access to even basic English education because the factors that support good education, such as less qualified teachers, a lack of parental support, and limited educational facilities, are not available to them. The supporting factors available in the rural area are not as comprehensive as those in the city, with only companion books and a lack of learning aids to back them up. Furthermore, due to a lack of teaching staff, teachers who are not in accordance with their fields are eventually required to teach English even without learning qualifications. Parental support factors, such as a lack of parental knowledge about learning English and a lack of parental financial resources to support English language learning for their children, also have an impact on learning in rural areas.

As a result, with several factors that affect the achievement of English learning outcomes, children in urban areas have more advantages. Specifically, as long as they are successful and can understand the existing learning materials, they are also better able to apply the 4 existing skills, such as being more fluent in speaking English, knowing more vocabulary, and being better able to express themselves in English. However, this cannot be compared to the situation in rural areas, where children are only able to understand the material and succeed in answering the questions given by the teacher. They have not been able to develop a way of speaking using English or everyday conversation.

Regarding the above problems, the researcher is interested in conducting a study to investigate the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching English to young students and determine learning strategies that can be used to overcome these issues in a rural elementary school in Ponorogo, East Java, Indonesia. In a similar vein, Wiyani (2014) mentions that the development of children's language skills includes aspects of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Then, according to Yusuf (2016), speech is the ability to say words as a result of learning through imitation (imitation) of the sounds heard from others. According to Gusrayani (2014), teachers must be more creative and innovative when teaching English, keeping in mind that children are still thinking concretely, and they must prompt teachers to try to concretize abstract language. Teachers are needed to provide an understanding of children's language development, particularly in improving the development of children's language skills (Susanto, 2017). It can be concluded that teaching English to children in their early childhood must be done with concrete activities so that children understand what it means. For example, through speaking activities, children can imitate what the teacher says. The teacher's method has a large influence on the optimal achievement of goals.

However, in practice, the problem is that English is rarely taught as an introduction to children's language skills, despite the fact that the importance of rapid language development is greatest at the golden age of children, and English is an international language. This is due to a lack of knowledge about English learning methods that are appropriate for speaking English skills in early childhood.

Teachers must be creative and innovative in their learning, such as when selecting or determining learning strategies, selecting tools or media, types and forms of learning systems, and evaluating tools (Kasihani, 2013). This is done so that the activities carried out are more interesting and can arouse curiosity. Know your children and encourage them to think critically and to be able to determine new things. According to Suriansyah's (2015) research, quality learning outcomes can be produced through

a quality learning process. Nasirun (2017) agrees that the method used to improve children's language abilities must be acceptable; if the method is not appropriate, it can impede children's language development. According to Mart (2012), teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies.

Learning approaches have a significant impact on children's learning results; here are a few that are appropriate for learning English in early childhood: Muryanti (2011) describes singing, playing, and storytelling as activities. The four methods of learning English for early childhood must be tailored to the features and needs of children and must include a variety of enjoyable activities as well as instructional aspects for children, particularly for the development of their English skills. This paper aims to explain the challenges of teaching English in rural areas and the learning strategies applied by the English teacher to overcome the problem. It will offer some positive suggestions for teachers, policymakers, parents, and professional educators to improve the quality of English language teaching, particularly in elementary schools in remote areas, not only in Ponorogo but also in other areas facing similar problems.

## 2. METHODS

In order to collect data, all aspects of the English teaching and learning activities at an elementary school in Ponorogo, specifically Sendang, will be investigated. Regarding the purpose of describing an actual case in the subject, namely the obstacles and factors that occur in teaching English. In particular, this research is classified as a qualitative research type. According to Yin (2018), when the focus of the research is on phenomena that are current (present) in the context of real life, case studies are a better strategy. The primary goals of the case study are to improve analytical, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, as well as to gain a better understanding of the system. For the data collection, interviews, and observation.

The interviews were based on a common set of questions, with some follow-up questions as the teachers raised issues so that their knowledge and beliefs could be explored in depth (Faridi, 2011). By using structured interviews, the interviews lasted 30 to 40 minutes and were conducted in Indonesian because the researcher is a native speaker of the language. A teacher from the school was selected as a participant for the piloting process as the school is located in a rural area. The interview lasted 32 minutes and included several follow-up questions to elicit the teacher's perspective. The field note method was aimed at finding the teacher's practice, strategies, and methods used in TEYL. The field note utilized the form of a simple table containing several statements of observation. The researcher filled out the observation sheet while conducting direct observations for three months.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Result of Interview with English teachers at the research site

#### 3.1.1 The State of English in Primary School

According to data obtained from interviews with one of the English teachers, there were several factors that impeded the process of learning English in schools and continue to do so today, namely, schools place less emphasis on learning English than on learning other subjects. core. Schools would rather spend money supporting teachers teaching core subjects than on learning English.

*"I believe the school places little emphasis on English. They believe that because English is a secondary subject in school, it does not require special attention."*

It is possible to conclude that most rural elementary schools did not value English as a subject. As a result, schools appeared to disregard the importance of books and other tangible items that can assist teachers in improving the quality of their English instruction. Schools tended to support teachers who teach core subjects by providing more books to improve the quality of teaching, particularly for subjects that were tested in the national exam, despite the fact that school budgets were also limited.

The situation was exacerbated by schools' attitudes toward English, which do not regard English as important as other subjects. For English teachers, the status of English as a second subject has created a schism, and rural schools cannot afford pictures, cards, or videos due to limited budgets. Due to a lack of funds, schools were unable to provide appropriate learning resources for their students.

### 3.1.2 The English Curriculum Applied in the school

According to the results of interviews, the special English curriculum was only a summary of the local content curriculum. As a result, the English teacher was overly flexible when it came to determining 1) learning objectives, 2) teaching and learning processes, and 3) learning materials. Learning English as a result was pointless. Because the goals were unclear and undirected, the teaching and learning process, as well as the material, devolved into chaos. As a result, the English teaching and learning process is not logical and methodical.

*"In my opinion, the 2013 curriculum is better because teachers have more time to teach and can use other learning support tools."*

She believed that the new curriculum gave teachers more opportunities to improve the quality of English instruction. The teacher had the right to use more time to teach English, and the materials cover a broader range of topics than previously.

### 3.1.3 The English Teacher's Qualification

According to interviews, the English teacher had no formal English education training. On the other hand, English language education teachers were graduates from other fields such as elementary school teacher education, religion, and economics. In general, many principals did not hire English teachers. They could have asked the homeroom teacher to teach an English class instead. Because the teacher lacked the necessary English background, their pedagogical knowledge may have been insufficient to teach English. Despite her lack of qualifications as an English teacher, the principal assigned the English program to the homeroom teacher.

*"I began teaching in fifth grade as a grade teacher. The principal then assigned me to fill the position of honorary teacher, where I will continue my education by teaching English."*

This finding indicates that many of the teachers in this study did not begin their careers as English teachers for young learners. As a result of this practice, the majority of the teachers in this study were concerned about managing the English program. They believe they are insufficiently qualified to teach English. They are hesitant to distribute materials to students.

### 3.1.4 The Students' Socioeconomic Backgrounds

The difficulties that teachers encountered while teaching in rural primary schools were caused by factors other than government policy on English programs and teachers' competence. Students' parents also contributed significantly to the success of English programs in primary schools. Based on the interviews, the teacher agreed that students' motivation and success in learning English were influenced by their parents' socioeconomic status. This factor also had an impact on their teaching and, as a result, had become one of their challenges while teaching English. The majority of participants believed that students in rural areas typically have parents with low educational backgrounds. She explains:

*"Of course, because this is a rural school, the students who attend come from the surrounding area. The majority of the students here have parents who have completed junior high or high school. They even completed elementary school. Only a few of them finish university. I believe that students' socioeconomic status has a significant impact on their ability to learn English. Students from low-income families are less likely to be motivated and have a lack of vision when it comes to learning English. "*

The majority of the parents in this study work as laborers and live-in rural areas. They worked the majority of the time and left their children with family members. They believed it was the teacher's responsibility to educate their children, not them. As a result, they entrusted their child's education to the school and paid no attention to his or her educational development.

*"I usually assign homework to students so that they can learn from what they have already learned. However, because their parents did not speak English, they were unable to assist them with their homework. As a result, students are confused about their assignments, and there is no one to assist them."*

The teachers in this study agreed that they couldn't do it on their own. They still require parental assistance in assisting their children at home. They believe that 45 minutes per week is insufficient to ensure that students understand English, but their low socioeconomic status prevents them from assisting their children in learning English. For example, parents may have less time to work and more time to accompany their children as they learn English. Furthermore, due to their low income, they are unable to provide English-learning facilities. As a result, student motivation suffers, and they become disinterested in learning English.

### 3.1.5 The Teaching Strategies

According to the interview results, the teacher only had exercise books and cassettes as learning media. Furthermore, teachers were attempting to use social media at this time, but it was not going well due to internet connection issues in rural areas.

*"Because there are no textbooks yet, I usually teach English introductory books, and the children usually write the material. I also use recordings from YouTube and cassettes provided by the government on occasion."*

*"Learning in the classroom employs a variety of methods, including dictation, story-based learning, and the assignment of children to describe a study group."*

In fact, children seem to be invited to become really proficient in English. They have to write, read, and memorize vocabulary. The teaching and learning process were carried out in terms of the required exams, which do not give priority to developing students' communicative skills. They were only taught briefly and without any additional knowledge because the achievements taught were essentially limited to how to answer the questions on the exam. Furthermore, their learning was not aided by improvised tools.

Teaching and learning materials, such as good workbooks, textbooks, teacher handbooks, graphics, audio-video resources, and tools, are not well provided for this process.

## 3.2 The Result of Observation at the research site

In this observation section, the researcher made three observations when learning English in the classroom.

### 3.2.1 First Observation

Based on the observations, the teacher's teaching activities were in accordance with the existing learning design, with the details of the teacher's saying greetings to open the class. Then

proceed with reviewing the previous material. This was done by giving some questions to the selected students. After giving the quiz, the teacher continued learning by explaining the new material using a companion book, and the discussion was carried out in groups to facilitate student discussion activities. In addition, the teacher also used picture props to explain some of the vocabulary that will be taught. After the material presentation session was completed, the teacher gave assignments to students to work on the enrichment questions contained in the companion book and discuss the questions afterward. Students were also required to memorize the vocabulary that had been given. After the teaching session was over, the teacher gave a short story to practice reading at home. Then the lesson was closed with greetings and daily conversations that are commonly used.

### 3.2.2 Second Observation

Observation activities were carried out when English learning activities in grade 5 took place, which lasted 45 minutes. The teacher's learning activities began with greetings and daily conversations and were followed by a discussion of the previous material, in which each representative from the study group was appointed to come forward and read the story that was the homework. Following that, the teacher taught the day's learning material by handing out picture sheets to each child. Then, using the vocabulary that the teacher had taught them, each child was asked to describe the picture. The children were then asked to work on the enrichment sheet on the next page while the discussion of student work continued. After that, the lesson ended with a new song taught by the teacher and closed with the repetition of learning materials, quizzes, and greetings.

### 3.3.3 Third Observation

The third observation was conducted to review the learning that the English teacher had done in the classroom. Learning, according to this observation, began with greetings and a discussion about learning from the previous meeting. The students were asked to describe the previously shared image. The teacher then began playing the learning video that will be taught using a laptop, and the students were asked to name the characters and animals in the video. Following that, some of the children were asked to explain and retell the video that had been shown. At the end of the activity, the children responded to a series of questions based on the video that had been shown. The teacher closed the learning session with some new daily conversations from the video played by the teacher. The lesson was closed with greetings by the teacher.

## 3.3 Discussions

Learning English in rural schools presents more challenges than learning English in urban schools. There are numerous challenges to learning English in rural schools. The difficulties encountered were related to the status of English learning, the curriculum for English learning in elementary schools, the qualifications of teachers, and the socioeconomic status of students. Furthermore, one of the most common challenges in learning English in rural schools is a lack of student interest in English lessons, a lack of parental support for student learning development, and a shortage of qualified English teachers. These issues have emerged as a current concern in the field of education.

There is a disconnect between the policy of introducing English in primary schools and the school system. According to the description of the current practice of teaching English at the research site, the status of English as a local content subject is one of the factors unfavorable for teachers to run effective English programs. This is followed by a scarcity of resources for teaching English in primary schools, such as additional sources to supplement textbooks provided by local governments. In short, there is a

mismatch between policy and practice in Ponorogo's rural primary schools' English language programs.

The majority of English teachers have non-English educational backgrounds, limited pedagogical knowledge for teaching English in primary schools, and believe they are incompetent. Furthermore, teachers in rural schools are not provided with learning process training, such as the most recent curriculum training, which means teachers must also receive training in order to achieve learning objectives in accordance with the applicable curriculum. Teacher training is critical because it is one method of improving teacher competence in the classroom (Holgun & Morales, 2016).

According to Hoque (2019), different teaching methods can result in different student understandings and learning outcomes. Meanwhile, a qualified teacher is someone who can create learning activity plans. Learning activities must be included in the lesson plan, which includes learning objectives as the anticipated goal of the teaching and learning process. To determine whether students have met their learning objectives, the process of assessing student outcomes must be completed. The entire series is covered in the lesson plan. A good teacher should have a lesson plan that serves as a guide for students while they are learning. However, in practice, the use of lesson plans never works as well as it should. What is written in the lesson plans is never in line with the reality of learning in village schools. As a result, the situation is problematic because teachers are aware of their knowledge limitations but lack the strategies or support necessary to anticipate these limitations, other than the use of textbooks, because schools do not provide other resources to overcome these limitations.

Another factor is students' socioeconomic status. According to interviews, parents who understand the value of English are more likely to be from affluent families and to live in cities. Parents do not assist students in learning and do not exercise optimal control over their children. Parents in rural areas do not provide students with special learning motivation for developing their abilities, particularly those related to learning English. Working outside the company is more important for parents. This is related to rural economic conditions, which are typically associated with the lower middle-class economy. As a result, despite paying attention, they do not monitor their children's progress in the learning process at school. This means that parents in rural areas are unaware of the importance of English and leave their children's education to the school system. This has a significant impact on students' motivation and interest in learning English. Furthermore, parents have fewer financial means to invest in English learning support services.

Aside from the existence of several factors that influence English language learning in rural areas, many English teachers are attempting to do things in the learning process, such as strategies in the methods used. As for several teaching methods used by teachers in rural areas to teach English, namely TPR (Total Physical Response), the song method (singing), and the game method, because it is a foreign language approach method with instructions or orders, the TPR method is ideal for children's English learning (Widiputera, 2014). The song method, then, is one of the most appropriate approaches for presenting the process of learning English in early childhood (Taneri & Engin-Demir, 2011). The game method (playing) is a characteristic of children who essentially want to play all the time (Indriastuti, 2018). However, English learning is implemented in five stages at: before entering class, opening activities, perception activities, core activities, and closing activities. In essence, these findings support Sudrajat's (2018) assertion that the learning procedure is divided into three stages: preliminary activities, core activities, and final activities.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The importance of education in rural schools cannot be overstated. Because of the lack of environmental conditions, English teachers are expected to have the right skills for teaching techniques in rural areas, as well as a way to cope with the condition of students and the condition of school facilities, which are often inadequate. However, the competence of English teachers in rural schools is regarded as lower than that of teachers in urban schools). Access to learning resources, inadequate school facilities, and low wages make it difficult for rural schools to recruit competent teachers,



resulting in a learning process in the classroom that focuses solely on teachers. There are three broad conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, the government must consider the placement of English education in primary schools in the national curriculum, as well as the impact of school knowledge and belief that English should be taught effectively in primary school. Second, teacher education institutions must devise solutions to the problems that current English teachers in primary schools are encountering. Non-English teachers lack subject matter and pedagogical content related to English and, as a result, require professional development to address their problems competently. Finally, it is critical for parents to contribute more to the academic success of their children, rather than simply delegating responsibility to the school. As a recommendation, more studies are encouraged to develop the quality of TEYL in rural areas using action research design.

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