

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis into EFL Teachers' Experiences of Teaching in Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT

This interpretive phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers working in rural Indonesian schools. Educators of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) encounter distinctive challenges. The objective of this research is to gain insight into the perspectives of these educators, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to navigate their teaching environment. The study employs the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to give priority to the perspectives of educators through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, to reveal the complex reality of their professional lives. The findings reveal two primary themes: (i) Strategies by EFL teacher for overcoming challenges in rural schools and (ii) The application of emotions in the context of effective teaching methods in rural schools. Teachers frequently encounter difficulties due to students' limited English proficiency, inadequate parental guidance, and restricted access to technology. These educators address these challenges through a variety of strategies, including the use of reading and listening activities, parental involvement, digital tools, and interactive method. Furthermore, the maintenance of a positive emotional environment was identified as a key factor in effective teaching, with teachers playing a pivotal role in fostering a cheerful and supportive classroom atmosphere. This research contributes to the broader discourse on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education by offering insights into the distinctive dynamics of rural teaching environments. The findings have the potential to inform the development of targeted support structures and policies with the aim of enhancing the quality of English language education in rural schools. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance educational practices and policies that support both teachers and students in these unique settings, addressing their specific needs, challenges, and strengths.

Keywords: *EFL Teacher; Rural schools; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); ELT*

INTRODUCTION

Some people find it challenging to use a language other than their original tongue, yet it opens up new avenues of knowledge. As the global demand for English proficiency grows, devoted educators known as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers play a critical role in supporting this journey. According to Sulistiyo (2009) there are several factors creating difficulties for teaching EFL in Indonesia. First, EFL teachers must teach students in large classes, often with more than 50 student. However, the landscape of EFL teaching can be very different in rural environments. These environments often present unique challenges and opportunities that differ significantly from urban contexts.

Rural schools often struggle with limited resources, isolation, and varying levels of student engagement, all of which can have an impact on teaching and learning. Despite these challenges, rural schools offer unique cultural environments and tight-knit communities which can enrich education. This research seeks to explore the lived experiences of EFL teachers working in rural schools to

understand their perspectives, challenges, and the strategies they use to navigate the unique teaching environment.

This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with a focus on interpretation, hermeneutics, and ideography as core principles (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). This interpretive phenomenological study aims to fill this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of EFL teachers in rural schools. Through *semi-structured* interviews and thematic analysis, the research sought to reveal the nuanced reality of their professional lives and to explore their perceptions of their role, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, the study prioritizes the voices of teachers to gain a detailed understanding of their experiences.

The findings from this study will contribute to the broader discourse on EFL education by providing insights into the distinctive dynamics of rural teaching environments. These insights can inform the enhancement of support structures for rural EFL teachers. This research aims to facilitate more targeted and efficacious interventions to improve the quality of English language teaching in rural schools by focusing on the specific needs, challenges, and strengths of EFL teachers in rural areas.

To conclude, this study fills an important gap within the existing literature through its focus on interpretive phenomenology and rural EFL teachers' experiences. Through the exploration of their challenges and strategies, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of rural EFL classrooms, with the goal of developing better educational practices and policies that support teachers and students in these unique environments.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative paradigm to explore the experiences of EFL teachers who have taught in rural schools. According to (Creswell, 2014), Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of information, and conducts the study in a natural setting. This study used a research design in the form of Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a relatively recent qualitative methodology developed specifically for psychology. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) recognizes that different people perceive the world in very different ways, dependent on their personalities, prior life experiences and motivations (Smith and Osborn, 2003). This approach was chosen to investigate the experiences of some participants who teach in rural schools.

Participants

The participants in this study were EFL teachers who had teaching experience in rural schools. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling to ensure that the participants met the predetermined criteria. Purposive sampling is 'used respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information' (Kelly, 2010). The number of participants who met the criteria as EFL teachers was 4. All the participants had experience in teaching English for at least one year, and they were located in rural schools. These participants were located in different remote places such as Malang District and Lumajang District, East Java Province, Indonesia and Kupang District, NTT.

Data Collection

Participants will be given some questions in advance for briefing at the beginning of the interview session. Once the participant was ready to be interviewed, the interview was conducted. The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews. Megaldi and Berler (2020) argue that semi-structured interviews, despite having a topic trajectory provided before the interview, allow researchers to dig deeper for discovery.

Here, the researcher is interviewing the participant with the interview for reasons that suit the flexibility of the participant's time to be researched in relation to the participant's experience teaching in rural schools. The interviews will be conducted individually with a duration of approximately 60-90 minutes for each participant. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview guide will relate to the experiences of EFL teachers in rural schools (e.g. challenges, teaching strategies, use of resources, student engagement).

The results of the interviews are adjusted by the researcher in relation to the main focus of the research which is the experiences of EFL teachers while teaching in rural schools. The researcher used a recording device for the interview process, there were also two methods of interviewing: face-to-face and WhatsApp using Text/Audio Recorder.

To improve the efficiency of the interview procedure, the researcher used an interview guide. Participants were asked to answer a series of questions posed in the interview guide. The questions in the interview guide were designed to provide answers to the research questions. The specification of these questions is shown in the following table.

Table 1. Questions Theme

Sample of Questions	
1.	What are some of the biggest challenges you face in teaching English in a rural setting? How do you overcome these challenges? Describe them briefly.
2.	What teaching strategies do you think are most effective for engaging students in rural schools?
3.	How do you deal with the diverse learning needs and backgrounds of students in your classroom? And in your experience, what are the most effective ways to promote a positive and encouraging learning environment for your EFL students?
4.	Are there any methods used in adapting to meet the needs of your students in a rural context? And how can you adapt these methods to suit the needs of your students?
5.	Can you give an example of a particularly successful activity in English language learning in a rural school?

Data analysis

For each case in this study, the researcher used a semi-structured interview. First, the author familiarized herself with the interview transcripts of each participant interviewed. In this case, the author met with four participants with different experiences. The researcher was required to read each of these transcripts, which the researcher then noted according to the researcher's needs.

TABLE 2. Participants background information

No.	Name	Age	Grade	Years of The Experience
1	Kusnul Chotimah	53	All grade Elementary School	27 yr
2	Eka Resita	30	All grade Junior High School	11 yr
3	Durotun Nasihah	38	All grade Junior High School	5 yr
4	Sigit Puji Wicakson	32	8 th grade, Junior High School	7 yr

The researcher analyzed the data from each participant using thematic analysis. The reason the researcher used thematic analysis was to make it easier for the researcher to process the data that the author had previously obtained. Thematic analysis or the search for themes in the data is a strategic

choice as part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review (Saldana, 2013). This method of research is not generated automatically, but rather as a result of coding the data that researcher analyzed. According to Saldana, A theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded (that is why there is no "Theme Coding" method in this manual, but there are references to thematic analysis and a section called Themeing the Data).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

From the four participants, the researcher observed how they approached the role of English teacher in rural schools. Thematic content analysis of the interviews revealed two main themes. These themes were: (i) Strategies employed by EFL teacher to overcome challenges in rural schools; and (ii) The application of emotions in the context of effective teaching methods in rural schools. Table 3 presents a summary of the research results.

Table 3. Overview themes and sub-themes

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes
– Have little understanding – Difficulty in speaking English – Limited guidance – Different levels of English proficiency – Limited access to technology	Challenges for EFL teachers learning English	Strategies by EFL teacher for overcoming challenges in rural schools.
– Reading and listening activities – High motivation – Parental support – Watching English-language television shows – Utilizing digital tools – Seek out diverse resources – Utilize quizzes and games	EFL teachers' English language teaching strategies.	
– Happy feeling – Cheerful – Pleasant atmosphere – Gentle – Friendly – Always appreciating – Enthusiastic – Excited	Positive emotions of EFL teacher when teaching English.	The application of emotions in the context of effective teaching methods in rural schools.
– Manual methods – Use textbooks and dictionaries – Cultural approach – Learn a little bit of their local language – Play games – Translation method – Drilling method	English Learning methods by EFL teacher	

(i) Strategies employed by EFL teacher to overcome challenges in rural schools.

The first themes identified by the researcher was the challenges and strategies employed in English language instruction at rural schools, based on each participant's experiences. It was determined that there was a correlation in the strategies used to overcome challenges in teaching English at rural schools of learning.

Challenges for EFL teachers learning English

The researcher conducted interviews with four participants, and most of them discussed their experiences as EFL teachers in rural schools. One of the challenges that the participants identified was teaching English in rural schools (P1). The government sets a goal of having 80% of school instruction in both urban and rural schools conducted in English during class time. Given that the majority of content and information is available in English, which reaches 80% of the population, while only 1% is available in Bahasa Indonesia, it is evident that the use of English is pervasive and significant in contemporary life. As illustrated in the following quote, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in rural school presents:

"The challenge for an English teacher in a rural area is to use English 80% of the time during lessons, where students have little understanding and difficulty in speaking English due to limited guidance from their parents. This becomes a barrier in understanding the material provided by the teacher, as students have different levels of English proficiency. In addition, teachers face limitations in delivering materials due to limited access to technology."
(P1)

The quotations from the participants above demonstrate that EFL teachers encounter obstacles that impede the learning process of their students. The most significant challenges faced by EFL teacher are that students have limited comprehension of English and that students experience difficulty speaking English.

"Teachers prioritize the use of paper-based resources, while technology can only be used after ordering in advance due to limited availability. This poses a challenge when other teachers are using the projector, as it hinders the learning experience for both the English teacher and her students." (P1)

However, there is one challenge that can be addressed according to the circumstances of schools in rural.

EFL teachers' English language teaching strategies.

In the previous subtheme, the researcher discussed the difficulties inherent in teaching English in rural schools. In this section, the researcher observed the strategies employed by one of the participants in addressing the challenges encountered while teaching (P2). The participant perceived that teaching in rural schools was a more challenging experience than in urban schools.

"As an English teacher in rural areas, it may seem more challenging than teaching in urban areas. This may be due to the fact that urban areas have a greater variety of different backgrounds than rural areas, where the average knowledge and economic background is the same. However, I am able to overcome these challenges by using some strategies that might be effective during my classes". (P2)

The challenge, as outlined in the preceding paragraph, pertains to the vocabulary section. The participant, in their own words, states:

"My students' greatest challenge is vocabulary, which requires more knowledge of English vocabulary in order to familiarize them with it." (P2)

In addressing these challenges, participants employed a range of strategies that they believed were effective in enhancing students' acquisition of English. By disclosing their experiences, participants elucidated how the strategies were implemented in their own learning:

"The method I utilize is to consistently expose students to English through reading and listening activities that simulate conversational English. Additionally, students who demonstrate high motivation and parental support

tend to demonstrate greater ease in learning English. This can be achieved through activities such as watching English-language television shows with subtitles and utilizing digital tools to enhance learning. Furthermore, I seek out diverse resources that facilitate engaging and effective English learning. Additionally, I utilize quizzes and games to enhance students' vocabulary, which represents a significant area of focus in my previous discussions." (P2)

The experience described in the quote above is that of an EFL teacher who has faced the challenges of teaching English. The strategies described in the quote have been employed in teaching English.

(ii) The application of emotions in the context of effective teaching methods in rural schools.

In this second theme, the researcher found a correlation between EFL teachers' emotions towards teaching English and the methods used in teaching English. Learning methods are important in teaching English because by applying the right learning methods, learning can be done effectively and efficiently. So that students will be able to understand the subject matter more quickly and accurately (Ilyas and Syahid, 2018).

Positive emotions of EFL teacher when teaching English.

The next participant offered insights into the challenges of managing emotions in the classroom while instructing English:

"My experience while teaching English is very memorable. This is because when I teach I always show a happy feeling like that, students will feel that learning English is not a scary thing. In addition, I also show a cheerful nature in teaching so that students can also feel a pleasant atmosphere. And when teaching, be gentle because students are good feelers. When we are in a bad mood, they will follow our emotions. As much as possible, create a positive and friendly atmosphere. By always appreciating their every effort in learning, it makes them more enthusiastic and excited in learning English." (P3)

The preceding quotation suggests that the participant is able to maintain stable emotions while instructing students and is thus able to foster a positive and productive learning environment.

English Learning methods by EFL teacher

In this sub-theme, the researcher obtained data from a participant who shared his experience as an EFL teacher in a rural school. EFL teachers in rural schools have encountered a multitude of challenges. One such challenge is the lack of understanding of students in rural schools, which differs significantly from that of students in urban areas. To illustrate this point, participants stated that:

"I've had the pleasure of teaching in a wide variety of settings, including rural communities, which are often referred to as "3T" environments. I've faced many challenges along the way, and I've learned a lot about what works and what doesn't in teaching English." (P4)

This participant described one of the challenges and strategies in teaching English in rural schools. The participant also provided insights into the unique aspects of teaching in a rural school. By quoting the conversation from the researcher's interview with the participant, the participant stated:

"Some students still think that learning English is difficult for students in rural schools, but I've found that with the right approach, it can be done! I'd like to focus more on methods that use manual methods because, unfortunately, many rural areas don't have internet access." (P4)

Subsequently, the participant presented his experience by elucidating his methodology in instructing English as an EFL teacher in rural school (P4). The researcher then proceeded to cite a brief dialogue excerpted from the interview transcripts:

"...First, I use textbooks and dictionaries as their learning guidelines by translating Indonesian into English, but it does take a little while. To make things easier, I use a cultural approach with try to learn a little bit of their local language too. That way, I can translate and teach vocabulary more easily. I also like to play games with them now and again. But I think the best way to go about it is to use the translation method and

drilling method. Their basic knowledge is still lacking, so it's important to give them direct, clear instructions from the teacher". (P4)

The participants described one of the methods used, outlining the advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, they provided several alternatives that could be employed by other English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who teach in rural schools.

Discussions

This interpretive phenomenological study explored the experiences of EFL teachers in rural Indonesian schools, revealing significant challenges and the strategies used to overcome them. Two main themes emerged: strategies employed by EFL teachers to overcome challenges in rural schools, and the application of emotions in effective teaching methods.

In this study, researchers identified several challenges associated with teaching English in a rural setting. As previously discussed, one of the most significant challenges encountered is the limited access to the internet, which has an impact on the ability to utilize technology to access learning materials. According to Supriyadi et.al, the limitation of internet access, so that teachers and students were not able to access teaching media such as videos, audio, and pictures that can be used to support the teaching process. From this quote, it can be surmised that the primary obstacle in English language learning in rural settings is the lack of reliable internet connectivity. However, the researcher observed that participants were able to effectively address this challenge by utilizing paper-based materials as a manual learning tool when internet access was limited.

The findings indicate that teaching English in rural schools presents unique difficulties, primarily due to students' limited understanding and difficulty in speaking English. Factors such as lack of parental guidance, varied levels of English proficiency, and restricted access to technology exacerbate these challenges. Consistent with Sulistiyo (2009), who identified large class sizes as a major obstacle, our study highlights additional challenges specific to rural contexts.

Participants addressed these challenges by employing diverse strategies. These included integrating reading and listening activities, leveraging parental support, using digital tools when available, and engaging students with quizzes and games. These strategies align with existing literature suggesting that interactive and resourceful teaching methods can enhance language learning in resource-limited settings (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The second theme emphasized the importance of teachers' emotional engagement in fostering a positive learning environment. Participants reported that maintaining a cheerful and supportive demeanor significantly influenced students' attitudes toward learning English. This aligns with Ilyas and Syahid's (2018) assertion that the right learning methods, coupled with positive emotional reinforcement, can enhance educational outcomes.

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CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of EFL teaching in rural Indonesia by highlighting the unique challenges faced by teachers and the innovative strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles. By prioritizing teacher training, infrastructure development, and emotional engagement, stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of EFL education in rural schools, ultimately improving students' English proficiency and academic success.

This draft should serve as a foundation for your discussion section. You may need to adjust it to better fit the specific findings and nuances of your study.

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