

**Jurnal PEBSAS Volume 3 No 2 Tahun 2025**

**ISSN : 3025-0463**

**PEBSAS : JURNAL PENDIDIKAN BAHASA DAN SASTRA**

Volume 3 No 2 Tahun 2025

<https://jurnal.insanciptamedan.or.id/index.php/pebsas>

## **Addressing the Challenges of Learning English in a Rural School**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In rural educational institutions, various obstacles impede the acquisition of the English language. The difficulties experienced in learning English within these rural schools are intricately linked to the environmental conditions surrounding the students, the proficiency of the English instructor, and the overall educational atmosphere. This research examined the obstacles encountered by students engaged in English language studies in rural educational settings. Two English educators who participated in this qualitative research served as respondents. The results of this investigation indicate that the pursuit of English language proficiency in rural schools continues to encounter a multitude of challenges. The process of learning English proved to be arduous for several reasons, including the students' diminished motivation towards the subject and the insufficient external support, such as encouragement from both parents and the broader community.

**Keywords:** challenge, English, learning, rural school

### **INTRODUCTION**

The English language is currently recognized as one of the most significant global languages (Crystal, 1997). Proficiency in English is requisite in nearly every facet of contemporary existence, including education, employment, and commerce, among others. Achieving mastery in the English language provides individuals with substantial opportunities for securing employment across various sectors. Consequently, this reality compels nations worldwide, including Indonesia, to promote English language acquisition among their populations. Nevertheless, the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia presents considerable challenges in its pedagogy (Akbari, 2015).

Despite the long-standing instruction of English in Indonesia, which spans from secondary education to tertiary education, there is no assurance that learners will not encounter challenges in their English language acquisition. The instruction of English becomes progressively more arduous for students, particularly when the educational context is situated in rural settings. This situation is intricately linked to the inadequacy of educational resources and the surrounding environment. Rural educational institutions are often deprived of the abundant English language learning opportunities that their urban counterparts typically access. The availability of information about the English language is severely limited. Therefore, students frequently lack familiarity with English in their daily lives, which subsequently leads to a diminished interest in pursuing English language studies.

The objective of this research is to explore the challenges faced by rural educational institutions in the instruction of English. It is a well-established fact that rural schools are characterized by insufficient facilities across various domains. The availability of books as educational resources is frequently inadequate, classroom environments are substandard, and the absence of internet connectivity, which has become a ubiquitous resource for accessing supplementary learning materials, poses significant barriers. Furthermore, the existence of proper school infrastructure serves as an additional impediment. Indeed, there are instances where certain schools are unable to conduct educational activities during the rainy season. Moreover, the frequent alterations to the curriculum impose further difficulties, as educators in rural schools are required to adapt to new curricular mandates. For example, both instructors and learners in rural settings are currently grappling with the challenges associated with

implementing the 2013 curriculum. This curriculum's focus on scientific learning necessitates a substantial degree of student engagement in the learning process. This requirement presents a formidable challenge for students, as the pedagogical approach in rural educational contexts tends to be predominantly teacher-centered.

The 2013 curriculum presents significant challenges not only for students but also for educators, who are increasingly expected to exhibit heightened levels of creativity and innovation in the formulation of lesson plans within the educational setting. The successful implementation of this curriculum is perceived to confer greater advantages to urban schools, which inherently possess more robust support systems. Conversely, rural schools, which often contend with various controversies surrounding educational resources and assistance, will find the enactment of the 2013 curriculum, characterized by a substantial reliance on technological media, exceedingly challenging, thus complicating the educational experience for both teachers and students alike (Nurfuadah, 2014). This section aims to elucidate the circumstances faced by rural schools in addition to evaluating the qualifications of English educators within these institutions.

A predominant challenge confronting Indonesia's educational framework is its extensive geographical expanse, which encompasses numerous rural regions. The disparities in geographical distribution across different locales significantly impede the attainment of equitable access to educational resources (Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012, as cited in Febriana et al., 2018). Rural schools are characterized by a generally lower student enrollment per class, coupled with their locations being distant from urban centers (McCracken, J. David; Barcinas, 1991). As noted by Rich & Evans (2009), the typical enrollment in each classroom within rural schools seldom exceeds 30 students. Moreover, rural educational institutions are frequently situated in agricultural zones, which are often aligned with the lower-middle economic strata of the population (Bonnano, 2014). Furthermore, du Plessis (2014) identifies several attributes of rural locales as per UNESCO 2005, which include considerable distances from urban centers; unfavorable topographical features, including the quality of roads and bridges; severely restricted access to diverse information technologies; inadequate transportation infrastructure, such as the availability of buses and taxis; limited access to essential amenities and services, such as electricity, potable water, and sanitation facilities; as well as the prevalent economic

and social conditions, which typically reflect a state of poverty among the residents.

The school that is the object of this research is located in a rural area where there are not many media or learning resources that support learning English. In addition, the condition of students in the two schools does not pay much attention to the importance of learning English, as well as the family environment and the surrounding community. People's perspectives on urban and rural schools are different. Schools located Compared to urban areas, rural schools typically have fewer students and lower tuition costs (Howley et al., 2009). Many low-middle class households in rural areas—if not all—believe that education cannot ensure their success in life, which is an issue. In addition, rural areas are places marked by various factors such as limited facilities and infrastructure, low community welfare, as well as the quality of education that is considered inadequate, and education that is often neglected (Plessis, 2014). This can be seen from the number of parents who think that education cannot guarantee their welfare. In addition, parents also do not want their children to leave the house. Their concern is motivated by the reason that in general, children or youth who leave rural communities either to study or work abroad will never return. They will settle in certain areas in search of a better livelihood than their home area (Stricker, 2008, as cited in Howley et al., 2009). The mindset of parents that has been instilled from the start cannot be changed easily. Parents find it difficult to let their children go to school or continue their education to a higher level. They prefer their children to work rather than go to school (Febriana et al., 2018).

Economic difficulties are also one of the obstacles for rural communities and make parents not send their children to a higher level. In fact, not a few of the rural communities who have never attended school since birth, not even elementary school. So that parents who are illiterate and cannot count are found in many rural areas (Plessis, 2014). Students in rural areas do not get sufficient support from their parents for these reasons. This condition is even worse because of the opinion of the surrounding community and even the government who considers this to be a common thing in rural areas. Rather than helping to straighten rural people's mindsets about education,

In addition, learning support resources such as books, projector media, and others are not sufficiently available, so the focus of learning is

only on teacher explanations (Deyoung, 1991; Febriana et al., 2018). These factors Middle-class and upper-class parents frequently undervalue rural schools and prefer to send their kids to their preferred schools, the majority of which charge exorbitant tuition and have good facilities. This point of view indirectly affects the mindset of rural school students. Rural school students tend to feel inferior and consider themselves no better than students in urban schools (Hargreaves et al. 2009, quoted from (Febriana et al., 2018). Teachers have an important role in accomplishing classroom learning objectives. The teacher as an educator must be someone who has high professionalism and a high ability to help educate students. Teachers must be able to sew pieces of a challenge as a way that can be passed so that students do not fall into low motivation in learning. Teachers are trained professionals whose primary responsibility is to instruct, mentor, direct, train, assess, and evaluate pupils in formal education. (Sadulloh, 2018). Different teacher skills can produce different learning outcomes as well. Therefore, it is hoped that English teachers can have broad knowledge in guiding students in developing English learning skills. The quality of rural schools is lower than schools in urban areas, seen from the availability of competent easier access to instructional resources for teachers.

Some studies assume that teachers in urban schools have more access to developing subject matter, while rural school teachers often lack access to developing subject matter. This then encourages the learning process in the classroom to only focus on the teacher (Hargreaves et al. 2009, quoted from Febriana et al., 2018). The focus of learning which is only in the hands of the teacher results in students not having the will and ability to learn independently. Barley & Beesley (2007, quoted from (du Plessis, 2014.)) also suggested that the failure of learning English in rural schools was influenced by the lack of qualified teachers and resources to support the learning process.

Biddle & Azano (2016) also identify teacher recruitment and teacher training as general topics that mostly arise in rural schools. Rural school teachers need to have training in the teaching and learning process, such as developing methods and strategies in teaching English, training in the use of teaching media, as well as training in making materials that interest students. (Shibley, 1917, as quoted in Biddle & Azano, 2016)) states that isolationism in rural areas often has an impact on the teaching and learning process in schools. Therefore, teachers in rural schools need more training and initial preparation.

A teacher is said to be qualified, one of which is because the teacher has the ability to design learning activities in a learning plan, where the learning plan is a complete learning taken from the educational curriculum and becomes the main guide for the learning process. As Nunan (1999) said that the educational curriculum is a very important element in the learning process and teachers as educators play an important role in implementing it in the classroom. Richard (2001, as quoted by Nurfuadah, 2014)) said the educational curriculum consists of all learning activities in the classroom, starting from how students learn, how teachers help students learn, types of learning materials, what methods are applied by teachers, how teachers assess student assignments.

Learning activities must be included in the learning plan set which contains learning objectives, indicators, etc., as the expected target of the teaching and learning process. In addition, to find out whether the learning objectives have been achieved by students, an assessment process (assessment) of student results needs to be carried out (Jabbarifar, 20009; Looney et al., 2018). Learning assessment is an important part of the overall learning process so that assessment activities must be carried out by the teacher during the learning process. There are two main functions of classroom assessment, the first is to show whether the learning process has succeeded in achieving the learning objectives or not, the second is to explain the expectations of teachers about students (Biggs, 1999; Dunn et al., 2004, as quoted in (Jabbarifar, 20009). Thus, the ability to conduct assessments is a necessary skill for every teaching staff. It is clear that in all references related to learning assignments, it is always emphasized the importance of the teacher's ability to assess and this ability is always one of the indicators of the quality of teacher competence.

Apart from that, a good teacher can also be seen from several things including the teacher's personality, the teacher's behavior towards students inside and outside the classroom, the teacher's understanding of student needs, and even the teacher's dress style (Harmer, 2007). In addition, a good teacher is someone who is able to inspire students, respect students, create a good atmosphere in teaching, provide some creative media, pay attention to students' needs and appreciate the efforts made by students during the teaching and learning process. Also, a good teacher is someone who can correct or criticize students without offending them (Harmer, 2007). Although each teacher has a diverse personality and different ways of

interacting with students, good teacher ethics can give a better impression on students so that it can indirectly affect students' confidence in teaching.

## **METHODS**

A qualitative research design was used in this study. This method of study is used to examine and comprehend the significance of people or groups in relation to social issues (Creswell & Timothy C. Guetterman, 2020). The purpose of this study is to ascertain the difficulties associated with studying English in rural schools. The following queries are raised in relation to the study's subject: What are the challenges of learning English that often arise in rural schools? Two English teachers from two distinct schools took part in this study. To collect data, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted. The semi-structured interview aims to find out the challenges of learning English from the perspective of the English teacher. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain more extensive and in-depth data.

The next instrument is classroom observation, where this observation aims to observe the behavior of teachers and students during the learning process. The type of classroom observation used is non-participant observation, which means that the researcher only comes as an observer, not taking part in learning activities in class. The data obtained were analyzed using four steps, namely: codes, concepts, categories, and theories (Menter et al., 2011). The data obtained from the two instruments were then coded to find the data needed to become data that could provide answers to the questions in the research, because not all data obtained were in accordance with research needs, especially data obtained from open-ended questions. After going through the coding stage, the data is then conceptualized or put together according to the similarity of content. Furthermore, the data is categorized so that it will produce a theory, and the last stage is the data is explained in more detail and depth, so that it will form a research theory.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study intends to investigate the challenges faced by students studying English in rural schools. Data collection methods included class observations and interviews. Four methodologies created by were used to analyze the data's findings (Menter et al., 2011). The data obtained from this study indicate that rural schools have difficulty in learning English in the

classroom. These difficulties will be discussed in depth in the next section. This study found that there were more barriers to learning English in rural schools than in urban ones (Plessis, 2014; Ponmozhi & Thenmozhi, 2017; Hargreaves et al. 2009 quoted from Febriana et al., 2018). This is due to various factors, including low student interest in English lessons, lack of environmental and parental support, as well as the ineffectiveness of English teachers. The following is a further explanation of the factors that hinder learning English in rural schools.

### ***1. Students' Interest in English***

English is currently widely known by students in city schools, but it is different with schools in rural areas (Ponmozhi & Thenmozhi, 2017). English in rural areas is not widely known both inside and outside school (Plessis, 2014). Rural students do not know the importance of learning English other than as a subject in the national exam. Lack of knowledge about English has a big influence on the interest in learning that grows in students. In addition, the assumption that English is a difficult subject makes them not take great interest in learning English. Many of them learn English not optimally. In fact, many of the students only aim to answer the national exam. In addition, many students neglect English lessons and make it the umpteenth choice of other subjects.

Holguín & Morales (2016) also added students' actions in the classroom during the learning process, such as their lack of excitement for learning English, revealed that they had a low level of interest in what they were being taught. In this study, it was found that most of the students did not close attention to what the teacher is saying. They even do other things such as reading novels, drawing, joking with other friends. Then when the teacher sought attention by asking the material presented, most of the students were silent, some responded by saying 'yes/no' even though the question was much different from the answer 'yes/no'. Some of the students even laughed at their own answers, which showed that they were not really serious about studying.

This reflects that students do not understand the explanations or questions posed by the teacher. In addition, students often leave the classroom during lessons and return to class when class hours are over.

This is in accordance with the results of interviews conducted with two teachers in two schools.

First teacher; "Boys like to leave class and don't come back until class is over. I couldn't possibly find them while the study time was only two hours. So, I leave a case like this to the BK teacher. I report those who act and don't want to be spoken to. Almost in every hour of my lesson there is always a case. And this case is often repeated, they are not afraid and always repeat their mistakes." Another obstacle in rural schools related to students is that students do not want to do the assignments given by the teacher. They put forward various reasons so that the teacher did not give them assignments, among those reasons was that students felt they did not understand the assignments given by the teacher so that they would not be able to do them. This often happens which overwhelms the English teacher. The first teacher: "When given the task, they mostly complain, complain because they can't answer. Later on, I had to turn the schoolwork into homework because they never finished their assignments on time. Their reasons are many. So, like it or not, I want to use it as PR. The next day, they don't necessarily do it. The reason for forgetting to bring it and all that."

Another case occurred in the second school where students never attended the additional course activities held at the school. Courses held by the school are scheduled twice a week, which aims to provide additional lessons and provide additional time to complete unfinished class material. However, only a handful of students attended the course. In fact, several times no students were present at all.

Most of the students reasoned that they had a lot of extra-curricular activities to do after school, so they couldn't attend the extra lessons in the afternoon. In addition, students are not honest in doing assignments. When given homework to make a text, most students usually look for texts that are already available in books or other sources, rather than making their own according to their abilities. They admit this to their teacher without feeling guilty. Second teacher; "If they really intend and want to learn, of course they will choose English over other activities. But the proof is only a handful of students who come during the course. I also said, at least come once a week, but no one wants to. There are many reasons why these children are told to study." Second teacher: "How many times have I told you to make assignments to the best of your ability, but that's how they are. When I compare the original work with the cheated one, it's clear which one they came up with. When they were asked, yes, they confessed. They will

say, -the important thing is to become a teacher. Oh, I don't know what to do. Only a few students are aware and want to make their own assignments.”

## **2. Environmental Influence**

The environment is considered very influential on a person. The environment influences a person's mindset and motivation to do something, including rural school students in learning English. In general, motivation is defined as a way to influence a person or many people to do something in which there is a specific goal (Uno & Lamatenggo, 2010). The rural school environment that is not familiar with English makes students not very interested in learning English. In addition, the family environment or parents and place of residence also play a critical role in enhancing the standard of student learning. However, the role of parents in rural settings in helping students learn English is rated very low (Ramos Holguín & Aguirre Morales, 2016).

Parents do not help students learn and also do not control students optimally. Parents in rural areas do not provide specific motivation for students in developing their learning abilities, especially those related to learning English. Parents put more pressure on their children to work rather than go to school. This is related to economic conditions in rural areas which usually come from the lower middle-class economy. Thus, even though their children are in school, they do not control the extent to which their children develop in the learning process at school. This statement is supported by data obtained from interviews with two English teachers from two schools. In the second school, where students live in dormitories within the school environment, the teacher considers students' interest in learning English to be quite large. However, this great interest is not in line with the efforts that students make in the learning process.

First teacher: “Because they live in a dormitory, I think the environment is supportive. If they are asked if they are interested in learning English, yes, they will answer that they are interested. But if they were asked to just do the practice questions, they all complained. They will say English is difficult. So, interest is just an interest, not supported by their efforts. I think so. Interest must be accompanied by effort, right?”

In addition, in the second school, the teacher conveyed the polemics faced by students related to the economic conditions of the family and the

environment around where they lived that did not support students in carrying out their roles as students. Second teacher: "The children here go to school while working. During their work schedule, they will not go to school. In a week it can be counted as a day or two they can go to school, three days they don't come, the reason is because of work. Later, if we stop them from working, they will definitely say they don't have any money to spend. So, what can we do?". Second teacher: "Moreover, in the neighborhood where they live, many of their peers do not go to school. So, they sometimes do not go to school. And to my surprise, parents did not forbid. Just let it go."

### **3. English Teacher Competence**

Teacher competence is assessed from their ability to design and implement classroom learning well and maximally so that learning objectives can be achieved optimally as well. Two English teachers from these two schools have different ways of implementing learning in the classroom. The English teacher at the first school delivered the material according to what was in the textbook. The explanation of the material is described in simple language to make students understand quickly. The teacher conveys the material in detail, such as explaining the meaning of the text, the structure of the text, the linguistic features of the text, the purpose and showing examples which are then discussed together.

After finishing discussing the example text, the teacher asked students to make a text as discussed together as an assignment. Previously, the teacher asked students to ask questions about the material they did not understand. The questions that arise from students are not that they don't understand the content of the material, but students ask more about the meaning of vocabulary that they don't understand from the existing text examples. This is because students do not have a complete dictionary as a learning resource. The school only provides a few dictionaries which are shared with other classes which also have an English schedule on the same day. This is one proof that school facilities are very helpful in carrying out the learning process in the classroom. If learning facilities are inadequate, the learning process can be hampered (Ramos Holguín & Aguirre Morales, 2016).

The second teacher used a different method. The English teacher in the second school asked each student to come to the front of the class to read one paragraph of the text in the book, where the aim was to practice students' reading skills. The English teacher stated that the students still had difficulty in reading English texts. Students still read English vocabulary according to their writing and with improper pronunciation.

For example, reading the word 'earth' is read as 'heart'; 'noticeable' reads 'notaisable'; 'conclusion' is read according to the word 'conclusion' and so on. Students are also not fluent in pronouncing numbers in English such as pronouncing '2007, 2010, 2018' and so on. Students are still not able to distinguish basic numbers and multilevel numbers and their pronunciation. After that, the teacher asks students to answer questions related to the text that has been read. There, students find it difficult to understand their assignments because the teacher has not explained the material in detail. In this case, the teaching method that the teacher uses needs to be considered so that students do not get confused when doing assignments. As Harmer (2007) said that different teaching methods may result in different students' understanding and make different learning achievements. Both teachers gave examples of texts taken from the internet with topics that were quite heavy, with vocabulary that was not easily understood by students. To minimize student confusion, the teacher should provide an example of a text with a simple topic and with vocabulary that is not too difficult so that students can understand the text easily.

In addition, a qualified teacher is those who have the ability to design learning activity plans. Learning activities must be included in the lesson plan that contains learning objectives as the expected target of the teaching and learning process. To find out whether the learning objectives have been achieved by students, the process of assessing student outcomes needs to be carried out (Jabbarifar, 2009; Looney et al., 2018)). This whole series is covered in the lesson plan (RPP). A good teacher should have a learning device that is used as a guide in learning. However, in reality, the use of RPP has never worked as it should. What is written in the RPP is never in line with the reality of learning in village schools. The two English teachers at the two schools admitted that they never used lesson plans when teaching. The first and second teachers: "I can't. The use of RPP cannot work here. The condition of the students here is different. Especially with these kids. They are hard to tell. Just paying attention to the explanation, I had to

scream until I was hoarse, then they would pay a little attention. So, I never stick to the RPP.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The value of education in rural schools cannot be understated. English teachers are needed to have the appropriate abilities for teaching tactics in rural areas, as well as know how to cope with student situations and the typically subpar state of school facilities. This is related to the environmental conditions that are all missing. However, in comparison to their urban counterparts, English teachers in rural schools are viewed as less competent (Hargreaves et al. 2009, quoted from Febriana et al., 2018)). It is challenging for rural schools to hire qualified teachers due to a lack of learning resources, inadequate school facilities, and low pay, which results in the learning process in the classroom focusing only on the teachers (Knoblauch & Chase, 2015; Plessis, 2014).

Instructors in rural schools are also not provided with training in the learning process, such as training on the most recent curricula, where teachers ought to have training in order to accomplish learning objectives in accordance with the applicable curricula. Since it is one approach to increasing a teacher's competency in the classroom, teacher training is crucial (Ramos Holguín & Aguirre Morales, 2016) [19]. The lack of student enthusiasm in English classes, parental support for student learning progress, and a lack of qualified English teachers are other difficulties that frequently arise in rural schools for students learning the language.

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