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Challenges in teaching and learning English as a Second Language in rural Schools

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English is a language which enables every nation to communicate without boundaries hence it became a global lingua franca. English language skills act as a colonial legacy and symbolize the success and social class in certain countries. Nonetheless it is important to have a proficiency in English language (EL) to participate in global academic, professional and social world. However, quality English language instruction is not consistent for all contexts around the world, notably it is limited in rural areas. This literature review, under the topic 'Challenges in Teaching English as a Second Language in Rural Schools,' aims to explore the challenges faced by both teachers and students in ESL teaching and learning in rural schools.

This study is a descriptive literature review, primarily based on peer-reviewed academic sources in the field of education. It identifies socio-cultural, economic, curriculum, policy, technological, and pedagogical challenges in various rural contexts. By identifying these challenges, this study provides a better understanding of the factors affecting ESL education in rural contexts. Overall, this thesis contributes to understanding the challenges in ESL teaching and learning, which is essential for informing more effective approaches in rural educational settings.

This literature review identifies teacher-related challenges, including the professional quality and preparation of English teachers, limited resources, low salaries, overcrowded classrooms, lack of ESL training and career development, high workload, multifaceted roles, and emotional and pedagogical strain. Learner-related challenges encompass cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors, including language anxiety, low engagement and interest, low self-efficacy and confidence, and a lack of metacognitive skills. Additionally, limited technological support, poverty, curriculum and policy constraints, and pedagogical challenges, such as implementing learner-centred teaching methods, were highlighted as key findings in this literature review.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, Rural Education, Teacher Challenges, Pedagogical Approaches, School Education, Educational Equity

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# 1 Introduction

Although the primary goal of a school is to educate students, a school is also one of the most influential bodies that socializes students, and its impact goes beyond the educational level to the cognitive, emotional, and social development of students. Especially in rural settings, schools provide learning opportunities, as well as engagement and motivation, and improve students' confidence in English language usage (Hashim & Yunus, 2018). The main context where children are exposed to English is school; hence, the quality of teaching, resources, and the classroom environment are critical factors for English language (EL) learning. Therefore, it is important to improve the quality of EL instruction, as well as the wider learning environment, including infrastructure and resource accessibility, especially in rural areas.

As a citizen of an Asian developing country, I have experienced many obstacles in rural school contexts that hinder student motivation and EL skills. I am personally interested in investigating the exact challenges that hinder authentic EL learning in rural contexts. Apart from my personal interest, this thesis topic, *Challenges in Teaching (ESL) in Rural Schools*, is significant in identifying the challenges in ESL teaching and learning in rural areas, providing an understanding of the current obstacles and offering suggestions and solutions to minimize them.

This study is a descriptive literature review conducted using peer-reviewed scholarly articles in the field of education, primarily sourced from Scopus-indexed journals. This thesis includes studies across primary, secondary, and high school levels to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research question. Relevant sources were identified through database searches using keywords such as “ESL in rural schools,” “challenges in ESL teaching and learning,” and “rural education.” Additional keywords included “English as a Second Language,” “teacher-related challenges,” “student-related challenges,” “pedagogical approaches,” “school education,” and “educational equity.”

My literature review is intended to explore answers to the following research question:

**“What are the challenges in teaching and learning ESL in rural schools?”**

This thesis is organized in three chapters, which are formed as follows. The second chapter is intended to provide an understanding of ESL education in rural schools. Under that topic, the definition, importance, overview, and status of teaching and learning EL in rural areas will be described. The third chapter answers the main research question: the challenges in teaching and learning ESL under several categories, which answer the sub-research questions, such as teacher-related, student-related, resource-related, socio-cultural challenges, economic challenges, curriculum and policy challenges, technological challenges, and pedagogical challenges.

This thesis has been written in accordance with the University of Oulu's principles for the responsible and ethical use of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) was used during the writing process of this literature review to support language editing, particularly to improve grammatical accuracy and enhance clarity and readability.

## **2 Understanding ESL in Rural Schools**

### **2.1 Significance of English as a Second Language in rural contexts**

Schools consider offering ESL to students whose native language is not English. Foreign language instruction and ESL are distinguished by previous research by highlighting functional language use, meaningful communication, and sociocultural participation rather than focusing on mastering grammar (Ruecker, 2021). In rural contexts, learning ESL is important because ESL not only acts as a school subject but also opens students to the external world with educational, social, and economic opportunities. As English is the most widely used language in the world, spoken by both native and non-native speakers, it is important to improve English language skills, as this provides benefits beyond the classroom in various global contexts. Based on previous ESL research, communicative competence is a combination of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Ruecker, 2021). Therefore, ESL learning is a complex process in which students build knowledge meaningfully by interacting with others in English rather than through passive learning and memorization.

In many postcolonial countries, English continues to hold a privileged position because of colonial history, especially in former British colonies such as Sri Lanka, India, and Malaysia (Kirkpatrick, 2011). English is often associated with higher social status and better employment

opportunities, particularly in professional and international sectors (Erling & Seargeant, 2013). It is also widely valued for access to higher education and global mobility, even where local languages remain dominant in daily life and government institutions (De Costa et al., 2016). Therefore, the colonial legacy of English continues to influence language hierarchies and socioeconomic opportunities in many societies (Tupas, 2015).

In previous academic research (Izquierdo et al., 2021) it is emphasized that EL acquisition is often considered a means of socialization and relates to learners' social environments; hence, the theories of language socialization often intersect with ESL learning. Rural ESL learning also cannot be separated from students' communities, culture, and experiences in the classrooms (Izquierdo et al., 2021). This study by Izquierdo et al. (2021) emphasized that many obstacles related to instruction and resources hinder the possibility of using EL beyond the classroom. Based on this viewpoint, EL cannot be considered a separate, isolated subject but rather a link that connects students' language competencies with broader educational and social domains.

ESL pedagogy highlights the connectedness of EL and learners' contexts, or the background of the learner, and their exposure to EL is significant in effective language learning. However, rural learners' limited exposure to the outside world makes classroom EL teaching approaches a critical implication and central for learners' language development (Ruecker, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021). Consequently, learners navigate this linguistic and social process, which enables them to participate in diverse broader contexts.

In several countries, English acts as a “gatekeeper” to access higher and professional educational paths; as a result, learners gain English language skills with the purpose of being successful in national examinations, tertiary programs, and competitive job markets (Ruecker, 2021). However, Ruecker's (2021) research suggested that EL is not merely a subject to pass examinations but also a resource to participate in the academic and civil world. The lack of EL skills in most rural schools hinders learners from benefiting from additional academic and digital resources, which are mainly in English. Through this lens, learning EL is a critical vehicle to access various platforms of knowledge, such as textbooks, online materials, and communication with people beyond the rural context (Ruecker, 2021).

Limited exposure to the English language outside the class increases apathy towards EL teaching among students (Coe-Iho & Henze, 2014). Learners also don't see the practical relevance of learning EL, as teachers mainly focus on correcting errors and decontextualized

grammar learning (Pinzón, 2014). Further, educational dissatisfaction is worsened by learner and teacher absenteeism, which has become a common trend (Izquierdo et al., 2021). Therefore, considering these factors, it is not a surprise that learners show limited commitment and learning outcomes in EL compared to urban areas (Hossain, 2016; Lamb, 2012; Zein, 2017). Learners actively engage in lessons once they realize the significance of EL learning and its relevance to their future (Lamb, 2012; Lamb, 2017). Also, positive responses to learners' active participation in EL tasks also assist them in EL lifelong learning with motivation and interest (Wang & Derakhshan, 2023).

## **2.2 Overview of Rural Schools**

One third of schools in the world are rural, and they are still invisible in urban-centric discourse, which impacts educational policies, curricula, and teacher training, all of which influence classroom pedagogy and instructional materials (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022; García-Prieto et al., 2019; Little, 2008).

Rural schools mainly differ from urban schools due to geographical, social, and economic conditions (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Barley & Beesley, 2007). Inouye et al. (2024) defines "rural" means not just an isolated school that is far from the city, but it can also be defined as a limited-resource school located in or near the city. Rural schools are often characterised by close relationships with the local community and environment (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Inouye et al., 2024). According to teachers, the rural school context is a diverse and connected place, with community influence on teaching and learning practices, which provides opportunities for context-specific pedagogy and relationship-based instruction (Inouye et al., 2024). This strong relationship with the community acts as a benefit for teachers to support students in their learning experience (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Biddle & Azano, 2016).

Rural schools often face several challenges, which limit the delivery of quality EL instruction. Some of the challenges are structural, and some are organizational. Most rural schools are defined as schools located far from urban areas, which also limits students and teachers in accessing resources, career development opportunities, and teaching expertise (Inouye et al., 2024). Isolation of rural schools affects qualified teacher recruitment and retention (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Biddle & Azano, 2016). Hence, geographic isolation affects both students' exposure as well as teacher recruitment. Teachers in rural schools take on several roles due to insufficient qualified teachers; hence, teachers serve schools as educators, counsellors, and

community liaisons, which increases their work burden and can lead to career burnout due to lack of support structures (Larsen & McGraw, 2018).

Another significant feature of rural schools is a smaller number of students and multigrade classrooms. Teachers struggle with multigrade classrooms because of a lack of teaching materials and the challenge of managing diverse learning needs simultaneously (Inouye et al., 2024). A smaller number of students in the classroom means teachers can manage the classroom well with individualized attention. However, in rural contexts, the lack of financial support, outdated educational resources, and limited or no access to digital technologies further intensifies the issue (Hennessy et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Due to limitations in digital technology, students are disadvantaged, with no interactive media or online resources, which impacts their learning experience (Bladergroen et al., 2012; Hennessy et al., 2021).

In many countries, rural communities earn low incomes or experience limited career opportunities. Due to these issues, they have limited access to healthcare and transportation, which also impacts the smooth functioning of a school and the learning outcomes of students. Hence, a school cannot be identified as an isolated entity (Inouye et al., 2024).

Echazarra and Radinger (2019) also explained that the lack of qualified teachers and poor infrastructure are not the only challenges in rural areas; factors such as school–community relations, staffing challenges, and the role of distance learning also affect students' learning experiences in rural areas.

Teaching materials are considered one of the most important resources for the pedagogical action of teachers and for the success of multigrade teaching (Boix & Bustos, 2014). Hence, it is important to prioritize their suitability and contextualization in rural areas (Raggl, 2015).

In summary, in this study, a rural school is considered to be an entity that has a close connection with its community, with smaller operations and unique instructional environments. Due to isolation, resource limitations, and limited teacher support, rural schools face several challenges, which emphasize the importance of addressing these challenges and improving policies and practices for better learning outcomes, educational equity, and social justice.

### **2.3 Current Status of Teaching and Learning English in Rural Areas**

Although the world is now in the technology era and many schools practice innovative technologies to teach, the status of many rural schools still reflects challenges in EL education. Compared with urban schools, most rural schools reflect discrepancies due to continuous systemic challenges. In the rural Malaysian school context, it has been proven that rural EL learners lag behind urban learners (Renganathan, 2021). The study by Renganathan (2021) further explained the reasons for the low performance as limited exposure to EL, poor infrastructure, limited teaching resources, and lack of parental involvement to assist EL learners at home. In rural schools, English is a compulsory subject, but due to limited language practice opportunities and other constraints, learners are unable to improve their EL proficiency and apply it beyond the classroom.

In rural contexts, the focus is on teacher capacity and preparation. Many teachers have limited access to improving ESL instruction through professional development and intervention programmes, which causes variable classroom instruction that depends on individual teachers' initiative (Renganathan, 2021). Even though many previous research studies suggest student-centred strategies and communicative strategies in language pedagogy, it remains a difficult task with the resource constraints.

In rural contexts, learners perceive English as abstract and irrelevant to their daily lives, which reduces learners' active engagement in lessons. The researchers found that a lack of exposure to English beyond the school context causes diminished motivation among learners and lowers their confidence in EL usage (Renganathan, 2021). In the classroom, it is not an easy task to improve learning with media, community communication, or interaction with peers without proper exposure to EL. These linguistic and social obstacles often highlight the significance of tailored pedagogical approaches.

Some research highlighted that even with limited resources, rural schools can improve student engagement through creative pedagogical approaches. Teachers' adaptability to the context and their resilience are significant for strengthening rural learners' ESL skills with limited resources (Gu & Day, 2007). Combining local content into lessons, peer interactive tasks, and informal community support can also be used to improve the language learning experience

(Coady, 2020). Even though these practices are not yet widespread, they reflect possible sustainable ESL interventions in rural schools (Coady, 2020).

In summary, the rural context still faces common challenges of continuous lack of resources, teacher support, and EL exposure. These challenges impact rural learners' EL proficiency and engagement and are elaborated on further in the following sections.

### **3 Challenges in Teaching and Learning ESL**

#### **3.1 Teacher-Related Challenges (Teaching)**

Liu et al. (2021) discussed challenges faced by rural EL teachers related to their professional quality and preparation. Previous research conducted in the rural Chinese context showed that even though experienced teachers demonstrate high-quality professionalism in terms of teaching content knowledge and beliefs, rural educators still operate under difficult situations such as limited resources, low salaries, and overcrowded classes (Liu et al., 2021). These factors negatively affect teachers in their teaching and long-term career retention (Liu et al., 2021).

Lack of ESL training and career development opportunities was also mentioned as a challenge in many studies conducted in rural contexts (Liu et al., 2021). The limited access to professional learning affects teachers in several ways, such as their inability to update pedagogical strategies, adapt to student-centred teaching methods, and integrate communicative language teaching (CLT) methods into instruction (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, the current practices of ESL teaching may not match modern teaching pedagogies, which hinders student engagement and better learning outcomes (Liu et al., 2021).

Heavy workload and multifaceted roles in rural schools are another challenge that teachers face. Due to an insufficient number of teachers, rural teachers must be responsible for teaching different subjects, administrative duties, and community roles (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Biddle & Azano, 2016). These factors impact the time teachers have for lesson planning, reflection, and professional growth. Multitasking and stressful situations in rural schools lead to teacher

burnout and dissatisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). In addition, rural teachers' isolation from society and limited opportunities for networking to support their profession create a feeling of professional marginalization from urban teachers (Johnson & Strange, 2009; Ruecker, 2021).

Context-related challenges also impact rural teachers' pedagogical approach (Ruecker, 2021). Adapting to the local linguistic and cultural environment has the same significance as language teaching knowledge in delivering effective ESL instruction (Ruecker, 2021). Due to limited exposure to English, teachers often adapt the standardized curriculum to cater to various multilingual learners (Ruecker, 2021). However, teachers obtain limited guidance and resources for such adaptation according to the context (Ruecker, 2021). This less supportive environment leads to teachers' emotional and pedagogical strain; therefore, balancing curriculum demands with strategies in an under-resourced context is significant (Ruecker, 2021).

Another topical challenge in rural settings is the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers (Liu et al., 2021). This has become a persistent and major issue in many rural contexts (Liu et al., 2021). Rural schools often struggle to attract qualified teachers and retain them due to reasons such as geographic isolation, lack of professional development opportunities, and differences in working conditions and compensation (Liu et al., 2021). Recruitment challenges relate to high turnover, reliance on less experienced teachers, and interruptions in the quality of the programmes (Liu et al., 2021). Hence, all the mentioned factors directly impact effective teaching in rural schools and learner improvement (Liu et al., 2021).

The mentioned challenges emphasize the need for systematic support beyond instructional improvement (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Liu et al., 2021). Moreover, professional development pathways, improved working conditions, and policies are also important for attracting qualified teachers (Collie et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

### **3.2 Student-Related Challenges (Learning)**

Cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors significantly influence rural learners' ESL development (Liu et al., 2024; Sparks & Alamer, 2024). Students' participation, confidence,

and exposure to English language interactions are essential for improving their language skills (Liu et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025). However, limited resources and lack of opportunities to practice the language restrict these dimensions in rural contexts (Renganathan, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021). Motivation is widely recognized as a key factor in second language learning, as it encourages learners to participate in activities and persist in challenging tasks (Liu et al., 2024). Liu et al. (2024) found that students with high levels of intrinsic motivation and enjoyment demonstrate greater persistence, whereas learners with low motivation tend to become discouraged and struggle with language learning. This issue is particularly relevant in rural educational contexts, where limited exposure and interaction opportunities further constrain learners' engagement (Renganathan, 2021; Izquierdo et al., 2021).

Language anxiety is another key affective factor that acts as a challenge in second language acquisition, particularly in rural contexts (Sparks & Alamer, 2024; Liu et al., 2024). This factor hinders learners' participation and oral communication (Sparks & Alamer, 2024). Students with high levels of language anxiety demonstrate limited engagement and slower reading skill development, even when other teaching aids are available (Sparks & Alamer, 2024). Anxiety may manifest as hesitation to speak, fear of making mistakes, and task avoidance, all of which diminish opportunities for authentic English language practice (Liu et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). If teachers are unable to create a low-anxiety learning environment, these challenges may persist and negatively affect language development (Sparks & Alamer, 2024). Therefore, addressing language anxiety through appropriate pedagogical strategies is essential, as active participation in language learning activities is critical for developing learners' language proficiency (Liu et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025).

Engagement and enjoyment of learning activities are also important factors that act as student-related challenges in rural schools, which affect learners' outcomes (Liu et al., 2024; Tseng, 2021). Physical education and motor imagery integrated with English language teaching, along with multimodal English instruction using interactive methods, improve students' ability to memorize vocabulary, enhance skill accuracy, and increase enjoyment (Wu et al., 2025). Although the stated study results are relevant for the adult general population, the findings provide significant insight into rural learners; teachers can combine physical activities and cognitive tasks to improve motivation, assist learners with memorization of vocabulary, and encourage active participation (Liu et al., 2024). Still, traditional teacher-centred pedagogical approaches are practiced in rural contexts (Tseng, 2021; Candrawati & Purbani, 2025), and

adapting innovative teaching strategies could diminish the challenges of limited engagement and language practice (Coady, 2020).

Another important factor influencing student learning is self-efficacy and confidence. Rural students often perceive their English abilities as limited due to reduced exposure and few opportunities for communication, which negatively affect their willingness to take risks in using the language (Izquierdo et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). Liu et al. (2024) emphasize that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to employ effective learning strategies, persist through difficulties, and achieve better outcomes. Conversely, learners with low confidence may avoid participation, creating a cycle of underperformance that hinders language acquisition (Sparks & Alamer, 2024).

Strategic and metacognitive skills are also considered important factors in regulating learners' own learning (Zhang, 2024). With the challenges of limited learning resources, online resources, or interactive practice opportunities, rural learners might struggle with self-regulation strategies (Mustafa et al., 2024).

As a summary, student-related challenges in rural schools that affect ESL learning include factors such as anxiety, engagement, motivation, low self-confidence, and lack of metacognitive skills (Liu et al., 2024; Sparks & Alamer, 2024). Therefore, teachers need to actively engage learners, which improves student enthusiasm, reduces anxiety, and enhances confidence (Tseng, 2021). This ensures learners stay motivated and improve their ESL skills despite the challenges of the rural context (Coady, 2020).

### **3.3 Resource-Related Challenges (Teaching and Learning)**

Resource-related issues in rural schools can be categorized into teacher availability, learning materials, technology, and infrastructure (Mustafa et al., 2024; Inouye et al., 2024). Compared with urban schools, rural schools generally have fewer resources because national policies often focus on urban areas, and rural contexts are frequently overlooked (European Schoolnet, 2023; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022). The challenges faced by rural schools need to be explicitly addressed in national policies to guide curriculum development and funding allocation (European Schoolnet, 2023).

Multigrade classrooms, which consist of students from different grades in one class, often have no multigrade learning materials; therefore, the teacher has the responsibility to adapt the materials according to the learners (Little, 2008; Carrete-Marín, Domingo-Peñañiel, & Simó-Gil, 2024). Finding materials for multigrade classrooms is highlighted as a difficulty that teachers face in rural schools (Carrete-Marín, Domingo-Peñañiel, & Simó-Gil, 2024).

Mustafa, Nguyen, and Gao (2024) identified challenges in technology integration in rural schools, which were categorized into macro, meso, and micro levels. Their study further explained that macro-level challenges, including lack of funding, teacher shortage, weak internet infrastructure, frequent blackouts, and limited inter-school collaboration, were prominent. Meso-level challenges included ill-prepared principals, lack of school devices, technical support gaps, maintenance issues, and space constraints, while micro-level challenges included low teacher ICT literacy, increased teacher workload, student device incompatibility, data costs for students, and limited student ICT skills (Mustafa et al., 2024).

Previous research highlighted that rural schools have resource limitations regarding technology, teaching materials, infrastructure, and support from the school. Without proper resources for teaching, rural schoolteachers struggle to achieve proper learning outcomes from the students.

Rural teachers face the challenge of inadequate teaching materials (Herdiyanti et al., 2025) to design engaging lessons. Resources such as updated textbooks, additional teaching materials, and visual aids are frequently limited. This limitation causes teachers to rely on traditional teaching methods in rural schools.

On the other hand, teacher-centered learning methods should not always be left behind because in rural schools, teachers act as knowledge sources, and teacher-centered techniques are appropriate teaching methods in rural contexts (Saiful & Triyono, 2018).

Students prefer studying the English language using games (Saiful & Triyono, 2018). Additionally, rural teachers create their own teaching materials with pictures due to limited learning resources, and teachers mentioned that students like to learn with additional teaching resources (Saiful & Triyono, 2018). Very limited learning resources, such as dictionaries and books, were challenges highlighted by rural school teachers. According to Saiful and Triyono (2018), teachers also highlighted that, due to the long distance from the city to the rural school, students face difficulty obtaining copies of learning materials.

Previous research has highlighted that rural schools often experience significant resource limitations in terms of technology, teaching materials, infrastructure, and institutional support. These constraints can negatively affect the quality of teaching and make it more challenging for teachers to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Herdiyanti et al., 2025; Saiful & Triyono, 2018).

Rural teachers frequently report a lack of adequate teaching materials (Herdiyanti et al., 2025), which makes it challenging to design engaging and effective lessons. Resources such as updated textbooks, supplementary materials, and visual aids are often limited. As a result, teachers tend to rely more on traditional, teacher-centered instructional approaches.

However, teacher-centered learning is not necessarily inappropriate in rural contexts. Previous studies suggest that in such settings, teachers often serve as the primary source of knowledge, making teacher-centered methods pedagogically relevant (Saiful & Triyono, 2018). At the same time, students show a preference for learning English through games and interactive activities (Saiful & Triyono, 2018). Due to limited resources, rural teachers often create their own teaching materials, such as picture-based resources, to support learning, and students respond positively to these additional supports (Saiful & Triyono, 2018).

Furthermore, limited access to learning resources such as dictionaries and textbooks remains a significant challenge. Saiful and Triyono (2018) also note that geographical distance from urban centers further restricts students' access to learning materials, making it difficult to obtain copies of essential educational resources.

### **3.4 Socio-Cultural Challenges (Learning Environment)**

Wu and Tarc (2021) found in their case study with Chinese lower-class college students how social factors affect rural students' English language learning, describing a lack of confidence and initiative that stemmed from their habitus. Wu and Tarc's (2021) study applied Bourdieu's social theory lenses of capital, habitus, and field; rural Chinese school students struggled with EL learning partly due to limited access to cultural and social capital. The students have a test-oriented mindset rather than communicative practices, which causes a reduction in their confidence and engagement in EL learning (Wu & Tarc, 2021). Additionally, the study

highlighted that teachers' and lower-class college students' deficit lens toward the knowledge and learning styles of students is also a reason for eroding their confidence (Wu & Tarc, 2021).

Izquierdo et al. (2021) explored socio-cultural challenges and how they affect students' EL learning in Mexican rural schools. The issues highlighted in the study were the motivation and attitudes of the students toward the English language. The local community values and their inadequate exposure to EL beyond the classroom also shaped them. In rural areas, EL is not used widely, and it seems less relevant to their day-to-day life; students' engagement is limited, and they show reluctance to participate actively in EL lessons (Izquierdo et al., 2021). Community members and parents also have low expectations for EL learning, which contributes to students' low motivation and enthusiasm for EL learning and improving their EL skills (Izquierdo et al., 2021). The study further identified that, due to a rural learning environment focused mainly on tests, teachers struggle to implement communicative and interactive teaching methods because of local educational norms and expectations (Izquierdo et al., 2021).

Todd Ruecker (2021) conducted institutional case studies at five high schools in the Southwestern US and highlighted challenges in rural schools. The study found that, due to a high number of immigrant students in rural schools, institutions face the additional challenge of lacking capacity and preparedness to support students from different backgrounds (Ruecker, 2021). Rural schools confront considerable difficulties due to inadequate experience with linguistic diversity among learners, designing a culturally appropriate curriculum, and recruiting qualified teachers (Ruecker, 2021).

### **3.5 Economic Challenges (Learning Opportunities)**

Wu and Tarc (2021) investigated, according to their study conducted with rural lower-class Chinese students, that the learners inhabited difficult and inferior positions due to a lack of different forms of capital, which are required to access language and cultural learning resources. The study further highlighted that, due to limited access to a stable internet connection and necessary digital learning materials, the students have limited exposure to EL beyond the classroom, and this hinders their opportunity to learn independently.

In rural contexts, hiring qualified teachers and retaining them in schools was another challenge. Funding was identified as the main constraint for recruiting qualified teachers (Ruecker, 2021). Ruecker (2021) noted that, due to insufficient funding in small districts, teachers often had to split their duties between ESL and other subjects, such as English or business. The study further highlighted that the inaccurate separation of students based on proficiency levels resulted in the creation of very small classes, which were costly to maintain (Ruecker, 2021). In addition, in the state of New Mexico, there was a lack of funding to adequately compensate teachers and to provide proper training for existing staff (Ruecker, 2021).

In the US, reliance on property taxes or local property taxes as school revenue means different schools have different amounts of funds to pay teachers, which leads to competition in teacher recruitment (Ruecker, 2021).

Ruecker (2021) further described that, due to salary variation among larger or neighboring districts, rural schools often struggle to remain competitive in attracting and retaining teachers. Larger district schools tend to attract teachers once they are trained because of higher salaries, which contributes to increased turnover in rural districts (Ruecker, 2021). The study's statistics showed that American rural towns such as Rio, Flatlands, Plains, Mineral, and Leon depend on agriculture, mining, service jobs, or federal laboratories, and they face economic obstacles, with significant poverty levels reaching up to 30% in some areas (Ruecker, 2021). These economic barriers result in limited resources for schools, and Ruecker (2021) highlighted that this leads to an "ad hoc" approach to English language instruction because rural schools often lack the infrastructure needed to design more structured and sustained programs.

Izquierdo et al. (2021) explored economic challenges in EL teaching in their study, which involved 115 generalist teachers in 17 rural secondary schools in Southeast Mexico. The study highlighted that, due to poorly remunerated family backgrounds, students have limited study time because of work commitments and restricted access to study resources (Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014; Hossain, 2016; Pinzón, 2014; Roldán & Peláez, 2017). The findings indicated that, according to teachers in this context, rural families often struggle with low income, which creates multiple barriers to education (Izquierdo et al., 2021). Students have limited time to complete assignments because they must work after school, and many families face challenges related to electricity and internet access, further limiting students' ability to use technology-enhanced learning materials provided by the Ministry of Education (Izquierdo et al., 2021). In

addition, low salaries discourage qualified language teachers from working in rural areas (Ramos Holguín & Aguirre Morales, 2016).

### **3.6 Curriculum and Policy Challenges (Teaching and Learning)**

Ruecker (2021) found that rural high schools in the United States often have limited knowledge and resources to support curriculum development, and that small program size restricts schools' ability to place students appropriately. As a result, students are frequently unable to experience cohesive and structured instructional programs. The study highlighted a lack of established curriculum and limited institutional knowledge about how to develop or procure materials that are suitable for their specific context and student needs (Ruecker, 2021). ESL teachers are often placed in positions without sufficient training or institutional support. Furthermore, teachers who are qualified in other subjects, such as art, are sometimes required to teach English language classes, despite lacking preparation in ESL instruction (Ruecker, 2021). In these cases, teachers are forced to improvise in the absence of formal curricular materials. Due to small student populations, schools often combine English language learners of varying proficiency levels into a single class, which makes effective differentiation of instruction challenging for teachers (Ruecker, 2021).

In the rural Mexican tele-secondary school system, generalist teachers (teachers who have not specialized in English language teaching) also face major curriculum and instructional challenges (Izquierdo et al., 2021). The study found that, due to a shortage of qualified English language teachers, schools often rely on generalist teachers to deliver English instruction. It further highlighted that the primary policy challenge is the lack of language specialists in rural schools (Izquierdo et al., 2021). According to the study's statistics, only 17 percent of teachers had completed a course to improve their English proficiency or pedagogical knowledge, while 89 percent had only expressed interest in receiving language training.

The study also emphasized the high curricular demands and lack of sensitivity to the realities of rural schools, the inadequacy of instructional resources, and the prioritization of other subjects over English language instruction (Izquierdo et al., 2021). When rural learners complete elementary education and transition to secondary education without the expected English language prerequisites, this gap is often not considered in curriculum design, making the curriculum appear rigid and disconnected from the rural context (Izquierdo et al., 2021).

Inouye et al. (2024) further explained that teachers' autonomy to modify the curriculum varies significantly by location. In their study, some teachers in California reported having no autonomy to adapt the curriculum, while in rural states such as Wyoming and Montana, greater flexibility was observed. The study suggested that smaller district administrative structures and closer relationships with school principals may contribute to this increased autonomy. However, this professional freedom is not consistent across all rural schools. District-mandated materials and limited decision-making power over curricular changes were identified as constraints in California (Inouye et al., 2024).

Carrete-Marín et al. (2024) further explored curriculum and policy challenges from an international perspective, drawing on informants from Latin American, European, and Anglo-Saxon contexts. Their study collected data from 47 expert focus groups situated in rural settings and highlighted a severe shortage of teaching resources, as well as the need for stronger pedagogical leadership to support rural teachers. The findings indicated that available teaching materials are largely standardized, designed for urban contexts, and often unsuitable for rural educational settings (Carrete-Marín et al., 2024). This curriculum mismatch presents a significant constraint for rural English language learners, as education systems continue to adopt an urban-centric model in the design of curriculum and instructional materials.

The study also emphasized that policymakers frequently overlook rural educational realities. Multigrade classrooms, where students of different ages and proficiency levels are taught together, present additional challenges for teachers, particularly because curriculum materials are typically grade-specific and lack flexibility for mixed-level instruction (Carrete-Marín et al., 2024). As a result, teachers often face difficulties in implementing the curriculum effectively and are compelled to design their own teaching materials or adapt unsuitable textbooks due to limited institutional and policy support.

Furthermore, Carrete-Marín et al. (2024) noted that rural schools are often invisible in educational research and policy discussions, reflecting broader structural neglect of rural education systems. The absence of digital platforms for sharing instructional resources further limits teacher support in these contexts. Overall, the study underscores the need to develop a more inclusive and context-responsive curriculum that better reflects the realities of rural educational environments (Carrete-Marín et al., 2024).

### **3.7 Technological Challenges (Teaching and Learning)**

Thirty-six empirical analyses were conducted in Mustafa et al. (2024), who explored technological challenges in under-resourced and rural schools between 2014 and 2023. The authors identified twenty-nine distinct constraints, categorized into macro, meso, and micro levels. Limited funding, unstable internet connectivity, and lack of specialized teacher training were highlighted as major contributors to the digital divide. The study emphasized that insufficient funding prevents schools from acquiring necessary technological equipment, while unstable internet results in slow, unreliable connections or complete service interruptions (Mustafa et al., 2024). In addition, the lack of qualified teachers with skills to integrate technology into instruction was identified as a significant barrier. The study also highlighted the absence of technical support staff to maintain devices and assist teachers with pedagogical applications. Even when devices are available, schools often struggle with inadequate maintenance of existing hardware (Mustafa et al., 2024).

Ahiaku et al. (2025) investigated digital inequality in South Africa, focusing on how geographic isolation and socioeconomic barriers contribute to systemic disconnection in rural secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. Although the study included data from one English language teacher, its findings are relevant to technological challenges in ESL teaching and learning. The study identified unreliable internet signals, lack of modern devices, and high data costs as major barriers. Physical location and infrastructural limitations further hinder internet connectivity in classrooms (Ahiaku et al., 2025). Many rural schools lack access to high-speed broadband and essential hardware, and even when smartboards are provided, they often remain non-functional due to lack of technical support or connectivity issues. Poverty also limits students' ability to access digital devices, as many rely on welfare grants and cannot afford such resources. This digital exclusion restricts their participation in the digital learning environment. Furthermore, insufficient professional development limits teachers' ability to effectively integrate technology into instruction, while traditional teaching norms in rural communities also hinder technological adoption (Ahiaku et al., 2025).

Candrawati and Purbani (2025), in a review of twenty empirical studies conducted between 2018 and 2024 in low-resource contexts, identified widespread technological challenges in education. These included limited or no access to the internet, digital devices, and electricity. The authors found that teachers were often dissatisfied due to outdated textbooks and a lack of

digital resources such as videos, audio materials, and educational applications. As a result, teachers relied heavily on traditional, teacher-centered approaches, which reduced student engagement and creativity (Candrawati & Purbani, 2025). The lack of infrastructure further constrained effective lesson delivery, while poor internet connectivity remained a persistent issue across rural schools. These limitations collectively contributed to reduced student motivation and engagement in learning (Candrawati & Purbani, 2025).

### **3.8 Pedagogical Challenges (Teaching Methods and Student Engagement)**

Kemaloglu-Er and Sahin (2022) in their study implemented project-based learning (PBL) in rural English classes to improve the quality of English teaching. In the study, they highlighted pedagogical challenges such as lack of resources and student interest. The study explained that in Turkey, the curriculum is the same for all regions and is not applicable to rural school students due to a mismatch with their interests, cultural, and social reasons. Also, families do not give much value to education, and their limited involvement and support for children's education is also an issue when improving students' proficiency in English. In the process of this project, the workload was mentioned as too heavy, and due to limited technology resources, it became a challenge to implement the project, increasing teachers' workload as all the necessary equipment had to be built in the school (Kemaloglu-Er & Sahin, 2022).

In the Taiwan context, pedagogy focuses on drills and grammar-translation methods, which are teacher-centered and test-oriented, and also follow the textbook content (Tseng, 2021; Hsu, 2020). These pedagogies limit students' opportunities to use semiotic resources (Siegel, 2012) and discourage their engagement with EFL learning if their strengths are not linguistic. Tseng (2025), in his study, explained the effectiveness of multimodal pedagogies in rural schools in Taiwan, where teacher-centered approaches had been used. Students' engagement and motivation improved after using the multimodal approach, especially for those previously demotivated by traditional teaching methods.

In ESL teaching, a monolingual approach also hinders students' active participation and engagement (Zondi & Mbatha, 2026). The study found that using students' different languages improves participation and engagement during ESL lessons in KwaZulu-Natal, South African public high schools. The data collected from the participants further highlights that complex

English jargon is too complicated for learners to understand when presented only in English, which emphasizes the importance of a translanguaging approach in ESL teaching.

Kong (2026), in his study of primary and secondary rural schools in China, reported that participating English teachers mentioned that English is considered a minor subject, and students are first exposed to English in grade 5. According to the teachers, some students do not know the alphabet in grade 5, and grade 6 students can hardly spell English words. English is treated more as a tool for passing examinations than as a means of communication. Students' limited motivation for English is further intensified by standardized textbooks that are irrelevant to rural lived experiences (Hu, 2003). The study also explained that the competing mindsets of parents and students place teachers in a dilemma, as they must focus on examination-oriented teaching under score pressure. Therefore, teachers follow drill-and-practice models and give repetitive tests to prepare students for examinations, which hinders opportunities to adopt innovative teaching approaches. Since the school treats English as a minor subject, only a limited amount of time is allocated for it each week. Additionally, teachers have burdens from non-teaching duties and classroom management, which act as barriers to innovation, draining the energy needed to create innovative lessons.

## **Discussion**

My descriptive literature review holds societal relevance in addressing educational inequality in rural areas by highlighting barriers to effective English language learning and teaching. It emphasizes equal access to quality language education and supports understanding of policy development and teacher training needs. Furthermore, it increases understanding of social mobility and national development. This study also highlights issues of inclusivity and equity in both rural and urban schools.

This thesis examines the challenges of English education in rural schools. Previous studies define "rural" not merely in terms of geographic remoteness, but also as schools with limited resources and strong community identity (Inouye et al., 2024). Previous research has also explored pedagogical approaches that may enhance English language learning in such contexts.

Rural EL learning and teaching challenges presented in previous literature are described by a lack of infrastructure, limited teaching resources, and overcrowded classrooms, which cause

ineffective EL teaching and communicative practices (Ruecker, 2021; Tanabalan et al., 2023). There are challenges that teachers face when implementing student-centered interactive teaching approaches, and students have limited exposure to EL inside and beyond the classroom. Generalist teachers, who teach multiple subjects including EL, often struggle with quality EL instruction due to insufficient training, support, and workload burden; hence, students' achievement is directly impacted by this (Izquierdo et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of exploring teacher proficiency in EL teaching and their support system to address the challenges and improve EL student achievement in rural schools.

Teacher-related challenges in EL learning are mostly associated with traditional student-centered teaching methods. In the current digital era, blended learning methods, which combine both digital and traditional approaches, have the potential to enhance learners' language acquisition and participation (Jerry & Yunus, 2021). From my point of view, this factor highlights that there is still the possibility for low-tech or hybrid methods to be adapted to improve learners' engagement in rural areas with limited infrastructure. Also, the limited number of qualified English language teachers is a challenge in rural contexts, which hinders students from learning consistently and maintaining continuity in EL instruction (Ruecker, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to prioritize teacher training and professional development to improve the quality of EL instruction.

Equal emphasis can be provided on socio-cultural challenges in the rural context, where students have limited exposure to English. Less familiarity, local community perspectives on EL, and language differences also create obstacles for effective EL communication (Poedjiastutie et al., 2018). Therefore, I perceive that EL teaching instruction strategies should be carefully formed and adapted, considering many of the mentioned critical factors that affect students' learning outcomes.

Another important factor that influences EL education in rural schools is socio-economic status. Children who come from poor economic backgrounds often have difficulties accessing additional educational resources and obtaining sufficient support at home to improve EL skills. Rural parents with limited EL skills and poor economic backgrounds further hinder their ability to support their children in language development activities (Tanabalan et al., 2023). Based on these factors affecting EL skills in rural students, it is not sufficient to focus solely on school-based solutions; collaboration with other stakeholders, such as parents and the community, is also essential.

By reviewing evidence from previous studies, this thesis aims to provide insights into the challenges that affect English language teaching and learning outcomes in rural schools. Emphasis is placed on barriers related to teaching practices, student engagement, and contextual factors within local school environments. In doing so, the study contributes to a better understanding of the issues that influence English education in rural settings, which may help educators and stakeholders identify areas for future improvement.

I considered key theories in second language acquisition, particularly the importance of comprehensible input and affective factors (Krashen, 1982), which are often challenges in rural learners' language learning. Social interaction and collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978) were also considered, as rural contexts often rely on traditional teacher-centered teaching methods that limit learner interaction. In addition, Communicative Language Teaching (Hymes, 1972; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) emphasizes student-centered interaction and real-life communication, which are important but often limited in rural classrooms. When aiming to develop English language learning in rural areas, these theories can offer a valuable basis for rethinking pedagogical approaches and learning practices in ways that better respond to rural learners' needs.

I believe that place-based education is a possible pedagogical approach to address the challenges of rural ESL teaching and learning, as it focuses on connecting learners with their local environment, culture, and community experiences. Since urban-based curricula often do not reflect the realities of rural learners, place-based education can improve learner engagement and make learning more meaningful (Yemini et al., 2023). By incorporating local community knowledge, familiar contexts, and everyday examples into lessons, it can increase student motivation and help bridge the gap between curriculum expectations and rural learners' experiences. In addition, place-based approaches can strengthen students' connection to learning while supporting educational equity in limited-resource contexts (Shi & Ma, 2025).

Future research could explore specific pedagogical approaches that influence student engagement and ESL learning outcomes in rural school classroom settings. Studies could examine how technology integration and physical activity-based learning strategies can enhance English language acquisition in rural contexts.

There is also a need for more empirical research in developing countries such as Sri Lanka, as limited peer-reviewed studies were found in this context, despite the relevance of these issues.

Therefore, further research at the master's level could focus on this topic to address the existing gap in the literature.

In addition, future studies could investigate how educational policies influence ESL education in rural areas and how effectively they are implemented in practice. While many studies focus on teachers' perspectives, there is a need to include students' perspectives in order to better understand learner-level challenges related to inclusion and equity in rural ESL education.

Longitudinal research could also be conducted to examine how students' English language development progresses over time when exposed to specific pedagogical or digital interventions. Furthermore, emerging areas such as the use of AI-supported tools in rural ESL learning contexts could be explored.

Future research could also focus on how teachers adapt pedagogical approaches in resource-limited rural settings, as well as how teacher professional development can be effectively supported in these areas. Additionally, the socio-emotional and motivational factors influencing rural learners require deeper investigation.

Finally, further studies could examine the role of families and community support in developing rural students' literacy skills and overall English language learning outcomes.

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