

## PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES IN RURAL ESL MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS IN MALAYSIA: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES TEACHING ACROSS GRADES

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**Abstract.** Multigrade classrooms, where a single teacher instructs students from multiple grade levels simultaneously, are typical in rural and low enrolment schools. This study explores ESL teachers' pedagogical challenges in rural multigrade classrooms in Malaysia, where one teacher delivers instruction across multiple grade levels. Drawing from a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving eight ESL teachers from low enrolment schools in Peninsular Malaysia. The findings reveal various challenges, including institutional and professional constraints, complexities in managing diverse grade-level expectations, time limitations, student motivation and proficiency gaps, low parental engagement, and emotional and practical struggles in lesson delivery. These challenges significantly hinder teachers' ability to maintain consistent instructional quality and adapt materials effectively. The study highlights the pressing necessity for targeted professional development, contextualized teaching support, and policies tailored to the unique demands of multigrade ESL instruction in rural settings. By foregrounding the voices of teachers, this research provides insights into the lived realities of rural multigrade educators and calls for systemic reforms to support pedagogical sustainability.

**Keywords:** *multigrade classrooms, ESL teaching, rural education, pedagogical challenges, teacher perspectives*

### Introduction

English language acquisition is a multifaceted process involving the development of vocabulary, reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. This process is influenced by various factors, including cognitive, affective, personal, and environmental elements. The school environment plays a pivotal role, encompassing academic, sociocultural, and physical conditions that shape teaching, learning, and student performance. A conducive school environment includes adequate physical infrastructure, instructional materials, manageable class sizes, and accessible resources. In Malaysia, Low Enrolment Schools (LES), locally known as Sekolah Kurang Murid (SKM), face unique challenges in creating supportive learning environments. These schools, typically located in rural or low socioeconomic areas, often lack resources, adequate infrastructure, and sufficient staffing. The limited access to extracurricular activities, diverse peers, and skilled teachers in these settings adversely affect students' academic performance and social development (Azman, 2016). To address these challenges, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has implemented multigrade classrooms, where a single teacher instructs

students from multiple grade levels simultaneously. While multigrade teaching is not a novel concept, educators need to adapt their pedagogical methodologies to effectively cater to a spectrum of age groups and varying levels of ability within the same class. This adaptation is crucial for fostering an inclusive learning environment that accommodates the diverse needs of all students. Umar and Aziz (2024) claimed that effective strategies such as differentiated instruction, communicative teaching, and authentic materials are crucial for fostering an engaging learning environment in such settings. Despite these efforts, ESL teachers in rural multigrade classrooms encounter significant pedagogical challenges. These include managing diverse grade-level expectations, time constraints, student motivation and proficiency gaps, low parental engagement, and emotional and practical struggles in lesson delivery. These challenges hinder teachers' ability to maintain consistent instructional quality and adapt materials effectively (Khalid, 2018). Thus, this study examines the pedagogical challenges faced by ESL teachers in rural multigrade classrooms in Malaysia. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives, this research seeks to provide insights into the lived realities of rural multigrade educators and inform systemic reforms to support pedagogical sustainability.

### ***Statement of problem***

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in rural Malaysian schools presents unique challenges, particularly within multigrade classrooms where a single teacher simultaneously instructs students across multiple grade levels. According to Shan and Abdul Aziz (2022), these settings, prevalent in low enrolment schools, often lack essential resources, infrastructure, and support systems, exacerbating the complexities of effective ESL instruction. Multigrade teaching requires educators to navigate diverse curricular requirements, varying student proficiency levels, and limited instructional time. Teachers frequently report difficulties in lesson planning, classroom management, and addressing students' individual needs within such heterogeneous groups, as reported by Naparan and Castañeda (2023). The scarcity of teaching materials and professional development opportunities further hinders their ability to implement effective pedagogical strategies (Gopining and Mohamad, 2023). Moreover, the geographical isolation of many rural schools contributes to professional isolation among teachers, thereby limiting collaboration and access to ongoing professional development. Kaka (2019) mentioned that this isolation, combined with the multifaceted demands of multigrade teaching, can lead to increased stress and job dissatisfaction, potentially impacting teacher retention and student outcomes. Despite the critical role of ESL education in Malaysia's multilingual context, there remains a paucity of research focusing on the specific challenges teachers face in rural multigrade classrooms. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences.

### ***Significance of the study***

This study provides crucial insights into the pedagogical challenges that ESL teachers face when adapting instructional materials and teaching practices in rural, multigrade classrooms. In low enrolment schools, where limited resources and mixed proficiency levels are common, teachers must juggle multiple responsibilities while maintaining instructional coherence across grade levels. By exploring these challenges, the study offers a deeper understanding of the realities on the ground, thereby

contributing to the growing yet still limited body of research on ESL multigrade education in Malaysia. The findings of this study hold significant practical implications for educators, school administrators, and policymakers by highlighting the need for more targeted support, including differentiated teacher training, improved planning structures, and greater awareness of the emotional and professional demands placed on ESL teachers in rural multigrade contexts. Sprenger (2021) noted that recognising challenges is key to developing constructive coping strategies. Therefore, this study aligns with that perspective by presenting grounded experiences and context-specific difficulties teachers report. The study informs policymakers and stakeholders' decisions regarding staffing, instructional support, and the implementation of multigrade classrooms. For educators and researchers, it provides a platform for further inquiry and professional development, focusing on sustaining high-quality English instruction in complex teaching settings. Ultimately, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the pedagogical realities in ESL multigrade classrooms and serves as an empirical foundation for informing educational policy, enhancing teacher preparation, and guiding future scholarly inquiry in this underexplored area.

### ***Research objective and research question***

The following is the research question of this study: What challenges do ESL teachers face when adapting instructional materials and pedagogical practices in these multigrade classrooms? And the research objectives is to identify challenges ESL teachers face when adapting instructional materials and pedagogical practice in these multigrade classrooms.

### ***Literature review***

#### ***Introduction to multigrade ESL classrooms in rural contexts***

In many rural and low enrolment schools, multigrade classrooms are necessary rather than a choice. These classrooms are often characterized by limited resources, diverse learner needs, and complex teaching arrangements. In Malaysia, multigrade classrooms in rural settings present unique pedagogical challenges, especially for teachers of ESL (English as a Second Language). ESL educators in such environments must juggle the instructional demands of multiple grade levels while striving to meet curriculum standards and support learners' language development. Dos Santos (2023) emphasized that educators in rural settings must adeptly tailor their pedagogical practices to align with their environments' unique natural and socio-cultural contexts. This adaptive approach has a significant impact on the strategies employed in designing and delivering instructional content.

#### ***Instructional challenges in multigrade ESL classrooms***

The complexity of teaching in multigrade classrooms is amplified when the subject involves a second language. Teachers must deal with varying levels of English proficiency, inconsistent student attendance, and the lack of suitable teaching and learning materials. These issues are further compounded by institutional constraints such as teacher shortages, inadequate professional training, and limited policy support (Ismail et al., 2022). Teachers frequently report feelings of isolation and burnout due to the multifaceted nature of their roles, which include planning differentiated lessons,

managing classroom behavior across age groups, and conducting assessments that align with different grade levels. Rustemi and Kurteshi (2023) emphasize that pedagogical practices serve as foundational components for developing professional teaching skills. However, when teachers are placed in challenging settings without adequate training or support, their ability to implement effective pedagogical approaches diminishes. This reality underscores the need to equip rural ESL teachers with specific skills tailored to multigrade environments.

### ***Material adaptation and pedagogical practices***

Material adaptation in multigrade English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms extends beyond mere content simplification, encompassing the critical need to align educational resources with the diverse linguistic and cognitive capabilities of learners. This tailored approach not only facilitates comprehension but also fosters an inclusive learning environment that caters to the varying needs of each student. Teachers often modify existing curriculum materials or create their own resources to better serve their students (Zulkefly and Razali, 2019). The need for pedagogical flexibility is paramount, as rigid instructional methods can alienate learners who do not align with the dominant grade-level standard. Astalini et al. (2023) highlight how science process skills impact students' critical thinking. This idea is translatable to language learning, emphasizing the importance of cognitive engagement and differentiated instruction. By leveraging interactive, student-centered teaching strategies, teachers can foster greater involvement and better language acquisition outcomes.

### ***Coping strategies and professional resilience***

Despite these challenges, many ESL teachers in rural multigrade settings adopt various coping strategies to sustain their motivation and teaching quality. These strategies include peer collaboration, family support, and personal reflection. Research by Tnay et al. (2022) indicates that a whole-school approach to emotional and social support among rural school teachers fosters greater teacher commitment and effectiveness. Similarly, Sprenger (2021) notes that when teachers are empowered to recognize and address their stressors, they are more likely to adopt positive coping mechanisms that enhance their well-being and professional performance. Teachers who develop resilience often exhibit stronger classroom management, better lesson planning, and increased engagement with their students. Such attributes are crucial in the context of multigrade ESL instruction, where unpredictability and high demands are common.

### ***Gaps in the literature and justification for the study***

Despite the growing research on multigrade classrooms and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, a notable deficiency exists in studies that examine the intersection of these two domains within the Malaysian rural context. The majority of existing literature tends to focus on urban environments or single-grade ESL settings, which inadequately capture the complexities encountered by rural ESL educators tasked with managing multiple grade levels concurrently. Moreover, although there has been a rise in interest regarding teacher well-being and instructional resilience, a paucity of research remains in investigating how these factors influence pedagogical adaptation within multigrade ESL classrooms. Therefore, this study is justified in addressing the existing research gap by elucidating the distinctive instructional challenges and material

adaptation strategies employed by ESL teachers in rural multigrade environments. It contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of the support mechanisms and pedagogical innovations necessary for enhancing teaching and learning outcomes in these under-explored contexts.

### ***Theoretical framework***

#### ***LEPO framework***

This study is underpinned by the Learning Environment, Learning Processes, and Learning Outcomes (LEPO) framework, which provides a comprehensive lens for examining the complex dynamics within multigrade ESL classrooms in rural contexts. Initially proposed by Radloff (2008), the LEPO framework emphasizes the interconnectedness between the context in which learning occurs (environment), how learning is facilitated (processes), and the results of learning (outcomes). The strength of this model lies in its ability to accommodate multiple layers of influence, making it highly relevant for analyzing pedagogical challenges in rural multigrade settings. In this study, the learning environment encompasses institutional, infrastructural, and socio-cultural factors that shape ESL teaching in rural low enrolment schools. These include the lack of specialized training for multigrade instruction, limited teaching resources, and unstable internet connectivity that directly impact the quality of instructional delivery. As Rustemi and Kurteshi (2023) assert, a teacher's ability to develop professional skills is often constrained by contextual limitations, including inadequate systemic support and minimal exposure to multigrade pedagogical practices.

The learning processes dimension focuses on how teaching is enacted in the classroom, including lesson planning, instructional strategies, and material adaptation. In multigrade classrooms, teachers often navigate simultaneous instruction across different grade levels, requiring differentiated teaching approaches and flexible pedagogical strategies. This aligns with the findings of Astalini et al. (2023), who observed that science process skills in rural schools were influenced by the adaptability and creativity of teachers in managing learning experiences. This becomes even more critical for ESL instruction, as language learning requires scaffolded, level-appropriate engagement, often challenging in mixed-grade setups. Finally, the learning outcomes component acknowledges the indirect implications of these teaching challenges on student achievement and motivation. While this study does not empirically assess student outcomes, it highlights teachers' perceptions of how pedagogical constraints influence learners' progress. Zulkefly and Razali (2019) note that rural students' attitudes toward learning English are significantly shaped by the availability of supportive learning environments and the perceived relevance of learning activities, factors deeply embedded in the LEPO model's environment and process domains. By adopting the LEPO framework, this study situates the pedagogical challenges of ESL teachers within a holistic structure that accounts for systemic, instructional, and learner-related dimensions. This theoretical lens guides data analysis and enhances understanding of the interrelated factors that affect effective ESL instruction in rural multigrade classrooms.

### **Materials and Methods**

#### ***Research design and respondents***

A research design outlines the blueprint for conducting a study, ensuring a structured data gathering and analysis process. This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate ESL teachers' challenges in multigrade classrooms, aiming to capture rich, contextual insights. Qualitative research, commonly utilized in educational and social science inquiries, allows researchers to explore beliefs, practices, and individual experiences within specific contexts (Mocănașu, 2020; Teherani, 2015). This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to examine the core phenomena. Semi-structured interviews offer participants the flexibility to express their views and narrate personal experiences while providing the researcher with opportunities to probe and clarify responses. This approach effectively reveals the complex realities of ESL instruction in multigrade settings.

To meet the aim of this research, a clearly defined criterion has guided the selection of participants. The focus was placed exclusively on national primary schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan-SK) with low student enrolment (below than 30 students) and located in Peninsular Malaysia. Eight ESL teachers were selected from eight schools across four states: Johor, Pahang, Perak, and Selangor. These states were chosen to represent different geographical regions: (1) East Malaysia-Pahang, (2) North Malaysia-Perak, (3) South Malaysia-Johor, and (4) Central Malaysia-Selangor. The selection of schools from each zone was intended to ensure broad regional representation and capture varied educational conditions across the peninsula. This strategy minimizes potential regional bias and strengthens the validity of the findings. It also supports the research objective of contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's multigrade ESL teaching landscape and informing the formulation of educational policy.

### ***Sampling method and instrument***

Participant selection is a vital step in ensuring that the study gathers relevant and credible data. This research employed purposive sampling, where participants were chosen based on specific, predefined criteria relevant to the study's focus. As emphasized by Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling enhances the alignment between research aims and participant profiles, improving both methodological soundness and study credibility. The sample consisted of eight ESL teachers, with two from each of the four selected states. This number was chosen based on data saturation, a key concept in qualitative research. Saturation occurs when no new themes emerge from further data collection, indicating the adequacy of the sample size (Mthuli et al., 2022; Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) recommends selecting 4 to 10 single case studies, while Creswell (2009) suggests 4 to 5 participants for multiple case designs. With eight teachers, the sample aligns with these expert recommendations, striking a balance between diversity and manageability. Bekele and Ago (2022) and Bryman (2016) also emphasise the importance of selecting a sufficiently large sample size to yield in-depth, meaningful data without becoming unwieldy. The carefully selected participants represent a diverse range of rural multigrade teaching environments, thereby enriching the relevance and applicability of the study's outcomes.

In order to gather extensive and relevant data that aligns with the research objectives, the study utilized a singular primary instrument for data collection, a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews were the core method used to explore the lived experiences and challenges of ESL teachers in rural multigrade settings. This format, which combines prepared questions with opportunities for open dialogue, is recognized for eliciting nuanced and insightful responses (Al Balushi, 2018). As Creswell (2013)

recommended, an interview protocol was utilized to guide the process, ensuring consistency while allowing flexibility. This protocol also facilitated systematic note-taking and audio recording during the sessions. The interview questions were developed to uncover the pedagogical complexities of multigrade ESL instruction. The two-way nature of the interview process enabled participants to reflect deeply and elaborate on their experiences, yielding rich qualitative data relevant to the study.

### ***Data collection procedure and data analysis techniques***

Aligned with the principles of qualitative case study methodology, this research adopts semi-structured interviews as its primary data collection method. The process commenced with the acquisition of a list of low enrolment schools that implement multigrade classrooms, which was retrieved from the official portal of the Ministry of Education Malaysia. The researcher then refined this preliminary list according to four predefined selection criteria. Priority was given to schools situated in Perak, Selangor, Johor, and Negeri Sembilan to ensure representation from each of the four major zones of Peninsular Malaysia. Following this, the researcher applied the Educational Research Application System (eRAS 2.0) to obtain research approval from the Education Policy Planning and Research Division (BPPDP) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). Once this central approval was granted, additional applications were sent to the respective State Education Departments of Johor, Perak, Pahang, and Selangor to seek authorization at the state level. Subsequently, formal letters were distributed to the identified schools to request permission to conduct the study on their premises. These letters also requested pertinent information, such as the number of ESL teachers, their contact details, and the number of multigrade classes available at each school. Upon receiving school responses, the researcher contacted the teachers to explain the study's purpose and obtain their willingness to participate. Informed verbal or written consent was obtained before arranging interviews or school visits. Interviews were then scheduled at the teachers' convenience, typically within the school setting. Participants could choose a comfortable location, such as their classroom or staff room, to ensure an open and relaxed conversation. Before initiating the interview, the researcher provided a concise briefing (approximately 5–8 minutes) outlining the study's objectives, interview procedures, and assurances of confidentiality. Teachers were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that all information collected would be used solely for academic purposes. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the depth of responses provided by the participants.

In qualitative research, data analysis is an integral process that facilitates the identification of patterns and the development of insights through an inductive approach. According to Creswell (2009), the analytical process includes organizing, familiarizing, interpreting, and making sense of the collected data. This study employed thematic analysis to examine interview data to understand the pedagogical strategies used in multigrade ESL classrooms. Thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to systematically identify recurring themes within the interview transcripts. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently coded to uncover emerging patterns. These patterns formed categories and subcategories to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the data concerning the research focus. This analytical process ensures a nuanced and detailed interpretation while upholding methodological rigor and dependability (Kalender and Erdem, 2021).

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews with eight ESL teachers addressing the research question: What challenges do ESL teachers face when adapting instructional materials and pedagogical practices in multigrade classrooms? The findings are organized thematically to reflect the key challenges identified by the teachers in adapting instructional materials and pedagogical practices in multigrade classrooms. Each theme is supported with illustrative excerpts from the participants' responses to provide a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences and perspectives. These findings contribute valuable insights into the complex realities of teaching in low enrolment, multigrade ESL settings. The results yielded seven main themes namely (1) institutional and professional challenges, (2) multiple complexities in multigrade teaching, (3) student motivation and proficiency (4) parents' engagement and attitude, (5) challenges in maintaining teaching continuity, (6) Internet connectivity challenges, and (7) emotional and practical struggle, and each with one or more sub-themes, reflecting the range of challenges experienced by participants. Semi-structured interview data from eight ESL teachers across four Malaysian states were used to develop these themes. The verbal responses obtained during the interview sessions have been synthesized employing a shorthand notation system, wherein the following pseudonyms are utilized: Haz, Uma, Wafi, Iqa, Zan, Nor, Siva, and Yus.

### ***Theme 1: Institutional and professional challenges***

#### ***Low number of teachers in low enrolment schools***

The first significant issue noted is the insufficient number of educators in low enrolment schools. Findings revealed that all Malaysian schools with fewer than 30 students are assigned up to seven teachers, which encompasses the principal, those in administrative roles, and all subject instructors. Given this limit of seven teachers, it is probable that each educator must manage multiple subjects across various grade levels, which can be quite daunting.

*“But this year has been a real struggle...One teacher retired, and there was no replacement. The headmaster was also transferred without a replacement, leaving only the five of us” (Yus)*

This illustrates the strain caused by staff shortages, which forces teachers to take on additional duties and compromises the effective delivery of teaching.

#### ***Replacement teacher misalignment***

Another prominent concern raised by participants was the misalignment between the qualifications of replacement teachers and the actual needs of rural low enrolment schools. Teachers reported that replacement teachers were often unfamiliar with the multigrade teaching environment, which disrupted instructional flow and increased the burden on existing staff.

*“When I first joined, the English teacher had already been transferred for a few months because they were promoted to a senior assistant position. So...the one*



*handling the class after that wasn't a trained English teacher. When I asked them about it, they just did things their own way"* (Iqa)

This scenario highlights the instructional instability when replacement teachers are not adequately trained to handle multigrade teaching contexts.

### ***Challenge of retaining staff including leadership***

Another critical issue was the difficulty in retaining qualified teachers and school leaders in rural schools. Some teachers mentioned the frequent transfer or resignation of headteachers and experienced teachers, which destabilized school operations.

*"Guru Besar also he has to go..aaa.. not like..he's from JPN actually. And he's leaving. Of course lah. He's from Kuantan, he don't want to be here for so long."* (Siva)

This reflects how geographic and lifestyle preferences affect staff retention, leaving rural schools in a constant cycle of administrative and instructional disruption.

## ***Theme 2: Multiple complexities in multigrade teaching***

### ***Increased work demands***

Teachers expressed that teaching multiple grades within a single classroom significantly increased their workload. They needed to prepare separate lesson plans and manage various content levels simultaneously.

*"We have to prepare materials for two classes... For example, for one lesson, I have to, it's called one lesson, like just now, one lesson with two periods, but I actually have to prepare two sets of materials because there are two different classes"* (Iqa)

This underscores how multigrade teaching imposes a significant planning burden, requiring teachers to operate as if they are conducting multiple lessons simultaneously.

### ***Time constraints***

Due to overlapping responsibilities, teachers faced challenges in managing their time effectively. This made it difficult to provide personalized support to all learners.

*"Earlier, there were supposed to be two activities, but the students could only complete one. We already did the lesson, they have learned it, but there wasn't enough time"* (Haz)

This demonstrates how time limitations constrain instructional depth and follow-up activities in multigrade settings.

## ***Theme 3: Student motivation and proficiency***

### ***Low student motivation and proficiency issues***

Teachers noted that many students in multigrade classrooms showed low interest in learning and struggled with basic language skills. This demotivation impacted classroom dynamics and hindered the effectiveness of teaching strategies.

*"There's one guy, orang asli.. budak asli..doesn't want to study, very difficult sometimes, doesn't want to do work...and there's another one, very weak"* (Uma)

This emphasizes the compounded challenge of teaching when learners lack intrinsic motivation and foundational skills.

#### ***Low student attendance***

Low attendance rates among students significantly impede academic advancement. Teachers indicated that irregular attendance disrupted the continuity of learning and required frequent repetition of lessons.

*"This year that one boy only come to school only 2 days only. So Year 3 aaa, 3 pupils. That day two didn't come, only one came. Today, one didn't come. So problem lah, problem when they don't come school"* (Siva)

This reflects how chronic absenteeism disrupts the learning process, requiring teachers to continually reteach and adapt.

#### ***Theme 4: Parents' engagement and attitude***

Many teachers reported minimal parental involvement, particularly in rural communities where education was not always prioritized. Some parents did not actively support their children's learning, resulting in disengagement and poor academic performance.

*"I said, 'Puan, could you help me? I will provide a text, and I need you to guide your child in reading it, record it on WhatsApp, and send it to me.' But the mother replied, 'I'm busy, teacher. Don't you have any other way?'"* (Haz)

This illustrates how a lack of parental cooperation can disrupt learning continuity and diminish the effectiveness of school-home collaboration.

#### ***Theme 5: Challenges in maintaining teaching continuity***

Teachers highlighted the difficulty in maintaining consistent instruction due to the overlapping needs of different grade levels, especially when they have to manage two grades simultaneously.

*"Sometimes, the problem I face is when I am in the middle of teaching, the Year 2 students will suddenly ask, 'Teacher, how do I do this? Teacher, I don't understand.' These kinds of interruptions happen"* (Haz)

This illustrates the difficulty of maintaining lesson momentum when attention must be split across multiple grades.

### ***Theme 6: Internet connectivity challenges***

Another major issue was limited internet access, especially in rural areas. This prevented using digital tools and platforms to enhance instruction or provide remote learning during emergencies.

*“I tried to use ICT in class. But this school, they have problems with the internet, it’s slow, so, I couldn’t do it. But now, we are... The internet is good now. But we are... we have problems in terms of laptop, not enough laptops and so on”* (Wafi)

This response reveals how infrastructural gaps in technology and connectivity hinder the integration of modern teaching tools.

### ***Theme 7: Emotional and practical struggle***

Many participants reflected on the emotional toll of teaching in multigrade classrooms. Feelings of exhaustion, inadequacy, and frustration were common, especially when efforts did not yield expected outcomes.

*“Challenging... because it’s exhausting, I feel so tired having to teach two classes at the same time, and then we also have to monitor student assessments. In small schools like this, you know, there aren’t many students, but in terms of work, it’s not just teaching, we have other responsibilities too, right?”* (Zan)

This quote captures the emotional and professional strain of multigrade teaching, where limited resources and overwhelming responsibilities often lead to burnout. However, despite these challenges, participants remained committed to their roles, expressing a deep responsibility for their students' growth. However, the findings clearly illustrate the complex and layered daily difficulties they face.

## **Conclusion**

This study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges that ESL teachers face when adapting instructional materials and pedagogical practices in rural, multigrade classrooms in Malaysia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eight teachers from low enrolment schools, the findings reveal that these educators operate within complex teaching environments shaped by institutional instability, demanding workloads, and limited resources. Seven major themes emerged, highlighting systemic issues such as mismatches in teacher replacement, high staff turnover, and inadequate professional support. Teachers reported increased work demands, time constraints, and difficulty maintaining teaching continuity due to curriculum shifts and inconsistent student attendance. These challenges are further compounded by students' low motivation and proficiency levels, limited parental engagement, poor internet access, and emotional fatigue among teachers themselves. Despite their commitment, these educators often feel isolated and overwhelmed, relying on personal resilience and improvisation without the structured institutional support they need. The findings emphasize the urgent need for context-sensitive policies, sustained professional development, and infrastructural improvements to support teachers in multigrade settings. Ultimately, this study calls for a deeper recognition of the unique realities in rural multigrade ESL classrooms.

Addressing these challenges is critical for teacher retention and well-being and essential to ensuring equitable and meaningful learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their school's size or location.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest with any parties in this research study.

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