

Research Article

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Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Teachers' Professional Identity: A Study of Novice English Teachers in Rural Schools

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Abstract

Background/purpose. The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the challenges novice English teachers face in rural secondary schools and to identify the coping strategies they employ to develop their professional identity.

Materials/methods. This study adopted a qualitative exploratory case study design. The research involved five novice teachers from different regions to capture diverse teaching contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Data analysis followed four systematic stages: coding, conceptualization, categorization, and theory development to identify key themes and construct an interpretive framework grounded in the participants' experiences.

Results. The study found that novice English teachers in rural Indonesia face low student motivation, mixed-ability classes, limited facilities, and unrealistic syllabi. Most rely on informal mentoring and use adaptive strategies like grouping and material simplification. Despite their resilience, sustainable growth requires systemic support through structured mentoring, adequate resources, and context-sensitive curricula to improve teaching effectiveness. The study revealed that novice English teachers in rural Indonesia showed strong adaptability and dedication despite facing diverse challenges. However, limited institutional support and lack of structured mentoring hindered their long-term professional growth and teaching effectiveness.

Conclusion. Novice English teachers in rural Indonesia face low motivation, mixed-ability classes, and limited resources. Despite minimal support, they adapt creatively, but sustainable growth requires structured mentoring and stronger institutional support.



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1. Introduction

Improving teacher quality is a critical priority for developing countries; accordingly, education and training to professionalize teaching are essential, because teachers are the spearhead of national education (Ahmadi, 1998). In educational institutions, teachers are responsible for instruction. Their characteristics, such as age, gender, and teaching experience, vary; however, individuals at the start of their careers are commonly classified as novice teachers. According to Kim & Roth (2011), novice teachers are those with less than five years of teaching experience in senior secondary education. Likewise, Helms-Lorenz et al. (2012) define novice teachers as employees who have recently obtained teaching qualifications and have less than three years of teaching experience.

Becoming a teacher in Indonesian senior secondary education requires specific prerequisites, including academic qualifications, competencies, educator certification, and physical and mental health, as well as other conditions that contribute to national education goals. Teaching English in rural schools presents additional difficulties. Indonesia's vast geography and the prevalence of rural areas hinder the equitable distribution of educational facilities (Febriana et al., 2018). In addition, limited facilities and infrastructure, low levels of social welfare, and an overall quality of education that is sometimes considered inadequate or neglected are contributing factors. Students in non-language majors also tend to have low English proficiency, and a frequently overlooked issue is that rural students often feel inferior and consider themselves no better than students in urban schools (Febriana et al., 2018). In light of this acknowledged research gap, we are only aware of a few studies that have focused on the multiple challenges novice language teachers face in rural Indonesian schools, especially in relation to their professional identity and coping strategies. Going beyond Teacher socialization: Existing literature tends to treat urban and more 'developed' contexts and does not adequately address how beginning teachers in rural areas manage these experiences.

Starting a new career as a rural secondary school teacher, therefore, entails numerous challenges. Warford & Reeves (2003) confirm that novice teachers face a range of problems in the early years of teaching, and identify 10 challenges. Farrell (2003) similarly suggests that the early years are marked by confusion, challenge, and tension. The novice teachers often experience stress, a lack of support, and a sense of unpreparedness when addressing students' behavioral and academic problems. In addition, novice educators frequently struggle to manage workload and to cope with stress and fatigue, especially in rural secondary contexts (Karpovich et al., 2020).

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that new teachers' lack of experience is often overlooked during training. In their first years, novice teachers must navigate a range of classroom challenges. There is a great need to determine how institutional support (or lack thereof) intersects with a novice's professional development and identity. Furthermore, professional responsibilities and school working conditions contribute to these stressors. Professional expectations and working conditions within the school environment further contribute to these pressures. Novices quickly recognize discrepancies between prescribed materials and the realities of classroom practice. Prior studies have identified related demands beyond instruction itself, frequent curriculum changes, added administrative responsibilities, the need for technological proficiency, and increasingly diverse student populations (Collie & Martin, 2016).

Moreover, many new teachers' skills are not yet as developed as those of experienced educators. Beginners may be less adept at organization and may hold fixed and limited knowledge focused primarily on content. Curriculum-related difficulties are often complex for them to anticipate, making it challenging to manage learning targets effectively (Gaikhorst et al., 2017). New teachers typically spend more time planning each lesson than experienced teachers; timing, material selection, scope of learning, pace, instructional and behavioral management, and the sequencing of activities are among the many factors they must consider. Thus, overly detailed lesson planning can become

tedious, distracting an educator from other tasks that may have a greater impact on the learner (Koni & Krull, 2018). In Indonesia, new educational design formats may also pose problems for beginning teachers. Many research papers have focused on lesson plans, particularly on the challenges of curriculum implementation (Nurfitri et al., 2020). Studies have also focused on teachers' views in different fields of schooling (Fitriani et al., 2020).

Karpovich et al.'s (2020) research involving 40 novice teachers indicated that 31% had a low level of readiness. Other areas of difficulty included high workloads, work-life imbalance, chronic anxiety, a defeatist attitude, poor self-care and self-improvement practices, and insufficient time for self-development. Faisal et al. (2020) reported on one of six case studies involving Indonesian beginning EFL teachers, which described areas of concern such as teaching quality, professional development, scholarly community activities, and available support systems. In another study, it was found that novice EFL teachers in Malaysia relied heavily on formal and informal mechanisms of professional support, instructional materials, manuals, and guides, online resources, workshops, and seminars, peer and senior teachers, subject and program leaders, and program heads (Ibrahim et al., 2012).

This study aims to investigate the multitude of barriers experienced by beginning English teachers in rural secondary schools and how they achieve professional identity. This research also aims to shed light on the complex instructional realities of early-career teachers, including underprofessionalization, the overwhelming volume of work, emotional and systemic attunement, and the need to adapt to prevailing institutional structures. This investigation is concerned with the umbrage and approaches to overcoming it, which, in turn, address the aims raised by the conceptual model of professional identity construction in the context of the educational system's more complex realities. This research is also concerned with understanding the barriers to professional identity construction in shifting to the more complex realities of the educational system. It is hoped that this shift in assumptions and practices would add to the "set of assumptions" underlying policy documents, educational institutional approaches, and teacher education practices by "constructing" the barriers faced by teachers and the support systems within which they operate. More responsive support systems are crucial for cultivating "novice teachers" and improving rural English education.

A study by Karpovich et al. (2020) involving 40 novice teachers found that 31% had low readiness. Additional challenges included excessive workload, poor work-life balance, high anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and limited time for self-development and improvement. (Faisal et al., 2020) conducted a study involving six Indonesian EFL beginner teachers who faced challenges in teaching quality, professional development, research knowledge, community service, and support systems. Other research indicates that novice EFL teachers in Malaysia refer to books, seek guidance from subject or program leaders, consult senior teachers and peers, use manuals and teaching guides, access online resources, attend workshops and seminars, ask advice from program heads, read journals, and seek guidance from the dean or head of the center (Ibrahim et al., 2012).

Based on the above explanation, the purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the challenges novice English teachers face in rural secondary schools and to identify the coping strategies they employ to develop their professional identity. This research aims to deepen understanding of how early-career teachers navigate the realities of teaching in resource-limited contexts, including instructional practice, workload management, emotional resilience, and adaptation to institutional demands. By examining both the obstacles and the strategies used to overcome them, the study seeks to highlight the dynamic process through which novice teachers construct their professional identity amid complex educational environments. Ultimately, the findings are expected to offer policymakers, educational institutions, and teacher training programs valuable insights for designing more responsive support systems that empower novice teachers and enhance the overall quality of English education in rural areas. Despite a wide range of existing research, we find that there has been little focus on how those new to the profession, notably novice

English language teachers in rural Indonesia, navigate challenges and adjust to their professional context. Although the general obstacles faced by novice teachers have been well documented, very few studies have explored the coping strategies of novice English teachers in rural schools, particularly in Indonesia. This void is what this study set out to fill by investigating the difficulties these teachers grapple with and how they mitigate them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Novice Teachers and Their Challenges

Hall and Smith (2006) describe a dichotomy between beginning and experienced teachers based on their practical teaching experience, which, in turn, affects their performance in the field. The novice teacher, as a graduate entering the teaching profession, typically has one to three years, a period that is often confusing. The early stage of teaching is frequently characterized by a "sink or swim" or "endure to live" mentality, because we often fail to provide adequate support and deliberate, ongoing development of teaching skills. Metaphorically, Copa (1991) suggests that every novice teacher enters the classroom as a stranger in a strange land, carrying a suitcase of belongings from an abandoned "old country" (Ruecker, 2017).

Another common challenge novice teachers face is the disproportionate level of responsibility assigned to them. The novices are often given the same responsibilities as their more experienced peers and are expected to perform at comparable levels. Richards (1998) similarly identifies heavy teaching and non-teaching workloads, as well as insufficient facilities, as factors that can adversely affect teaching performance. Despite these challenges, novice teachers exhibit distinctive characteristics shaped by their limited experience. In Fuller's (1969) four stages of teacher development, novices tend to occupy the initial stages, when prospective teachers begin to understand their roles as educators. Many of the roles novice teachers assume are tied to their teaching contexts, which may either facilitate or constrain opportunities to apply what they learned in preparation programs that shaped their outlook.

2.2. Teacher Professional Identity

In this study, we adopt Hong et al.'s (2024) definition of teacher professional identity as a framework through which teachers construct their own understanding of "how to be," "how to act," and "how to interpret" their work and their roles in society. Teacher identity goes beyond a checklist of competencies that a competent teacher must possess. It is an evolving concept whose formation does not end upon entry into the profession; rather, it is an ongoing process (Olsen, 2008). Consequently, teachers enter the profession with preconceived notions of what it means to teach, shaped by implicit theories of teaching and prior experiences of role modeling (Flores & Day, 2006). In their early years, teachers establish the foundations of their professional identity by negotiating their beliefs and initial conceptions of what constitutes a good teacher, a process that significantly influences their subsequent development. Before entering the profession, they have also been exposed to a variety of teaching approaches modeled by their own teachers.

The development of professional identity involves integrating personal attributes, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values with professional demands, including teaching standards and policies at the school or system level. In dynamic geopolitical contexts, these variables exert even greater influence on professional identity. In more advanced education systems such as Belgium, however, Schepens et al. (2009) found that teacher demographics, personality traits, and initial motivations for becoming a teacher have a stronger impact on identity. Individual characteristics thus play a crucial role alongside external factors in shaping a teacher's professional identity. Teachers value their personal backgrounds and integrate them into their professional lives (Tickle, 2000). This aligns with Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), who argue that teaching involves emotion, commitment,

enthusiasm, and courage. Psychological research on teachers similarly emphasizes emotion, motivation, and the fulfillment of basic needs through chosen career paths. The early years are particularly demanding because novice teachers develop core competencies and form their professional identity during this period (Mahmood, 2013). This perspective helps explain how novices navigate tensions between their preexisting beliefs about teaching and less-than-ideal working conditions that may conflict with theoretical knowledge or professional standards.

2.3. Coping Mechanisms

Subjective perspectives on the school setting and available support strengthen teachers' hands in the face of challenges and stress, as determined by Montgomery and Rupp (2005). This is also the most researched work by Prilleltensky et al. (2016), which found that the absence of developed coping strategies undermines teacher retention. In line with the work of Prilleltensky et al (2016), the absence of developed coping strategies undermines teacher retention. Among the many domains of coping strategies, clarification and boundary-setting, as described by Sharplin et al. (2011), merit consideration as direct-action strategies. Research documenting the direct-action strategies of teacher stressor removal has reduced job strain and burnout (Pogere et al., 2019).

The emotional alleviation described in the work of Pogere et al. (2019) is also documented as an aim of palliative strategies. Within the palliative strategies are the goals of psychological boundary setting, resource mobilization, and humour use. In contrast, withdrawal and distancing as avoidance strategies diminish motivation, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of achievement. Gustems et al (2019) documented the use of these strategies as correlated with clinical depression symptoms and reduced the likelihood of coping with stress at work.

Few studies have considered novice teachers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. In the Emirates, Dickson et al. (2014) reported high attrition among novices and cited difficulties with classroom management, heavy workloads, lesson preparation, intercultural relations with colleagues, and the work-life balance challenge. The novice teachers in the study from Qatari public schools used more direct and aggressive coping strategies in the public school system for classroom management and workload challenges than experienced public school teachers, who used a more complex combination of direct and palliative strategies. They highlighted differences not only in the challenges but also in the distinguishing features of coping strategies among novice and experienced public school teachers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore and understand the meanings constructed by individuals or related groups facing social problems (Creswell, 2012). Given the moderately bounded nature of the topic, the design is closely aligned with a case study, which characteristically provides rich descriptions of real people in this instance, novice teachers within authentic contexts and uses specific cases to illuminate broader principles (Cohen et al., 2007). Because the findings were intended to inform subsequent research, particularly program development, the case study was categorized as exploratory (Cohen et al., 2007) and served as a pre-developmental inquiry.

The objective was to understand the challenges of teaching English in rural schools. The guiding research question was (1) What challenges do novice English teachers frequently encounter when teaching in rural schools? Participants were five novice English teachers from two different schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews were used to obtain comprehensive, in-depth accounts of challenges from the teachers' perspectives. Although the sample size was limited, we sought to minimize superficial findings and to portray a complex understanding of novice teachers in the Indonesian context. Following Creswell's

(2012) guidance that increasing the number of subjects may reduce the depth of analysis, a multiple-case study approach was adopted, examining five novice teachers to illuminate experiences relevant to the study's aims.

3.2. Participants

The participants were five novice rural-based English teachers in Indonesia with diverse experiences working in rural schools, selected through purposive sampling. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: (I) Novice status i.e., teachers with less than five years of teaching experience (Kim & Roth, 2011); (II) Teaching context, that is, Teachers teaching English language at the secondary school-level in resource-constrained rural areas; and (III) Willingness to participate, meaning those teachers who agreed to share experiences and challenges after informed consent.

Details for the five teachers are presented in Table 1. Interview data served as the primary source of information about participants. To preserve confidentiality, teachers were labeled Participant Subjects (PS) 1–5. All five worked at different schools and in different regions. Two held bachelor's degrees from public universities and three from private universities. One participant's degree was in English Literature rather than English Language Teaching (ELT).

Table 1. Teacher Summary

Subject	Years of Experience	Gender	Academic Qual.
PS1	1 Years	M	English Language Teaching (ELT)
PS2	2 Years	F	English Language Teaching (ELT)
PS3	5 Years	F	English Literature
PS4	3 Years	M	English Language Teaching (ELT)
PS5	3 Years	F	English Language Teaching (ELT)

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

This research employed the multiple case study methodology, which has been considered effective for understanding individual complexity while revealing common themes (Yin, 2009). The data gathered in this research utilized two primary methods. The first consisted of semi-structured interviews with each of the five research participants to gain personal accounts of their classroom experiences. The interviews included questions about the challenges faced in the classroom, the methods used to overcome them, and the professional opportunities sought. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded.

Secondly, the classroom observations served as another data-gathering approach that supplemented the research. The observations were non-participatory and allowed the researcher to gather information on interactions between teachers and students, classroom management strategies, and the methods of instruction adopted by the research subjects in class. The research process used unobtrusive observations conducted in class to avoid disrupting the normal classroom setting.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data from both instruments were analyzed in four stages: coding, conceptualization, categorization, and theory development (Menter et al., 2011). First, all data were coded to isolate segments relevant to the research question, recognizing that not all information, especially responses to open-ended prompts, was pertinent. Second, codes were conceptualized by grouping them according to content similarity. Third, the emergent concepts were organized into categories to

support theory building. Finally, categories were examined in greater depth to elaborate and refine an interpretive framework grounded in the data.

4. Results

4.1. Professional Development

This section examines professional development practices among the participating teachers. The questionnaire sought information on teachers' reflective practice, action research, participation in professional development forums, and other development activities. In addition, it explored the types of support schools provide to help teachers continuously develop their professional competence. One participant (PS 2) explained the following:

Data (1)

"I personally routinely interact and submit Lots of questions related learning to learning a language to a senior English teacher who also served as chairman of the English Teacher Forum. He often gives me advice and assistance as a new teacher to keep learning and adapting to conditions on the ground. We often discuss the influence of students and classrooms, effective teaching methods, the development of appropriate materials, and appropriate techniques. I feel very helped by the support given by him."

In the context of initial professional development, beginning teachers recognized that they did not have an official, school-appointed mentor; however, they were able to rely on senior English teachers for consultation and guidance. These senior teachers helped them address work-related problems and provided advice and support to sustain their professional growth.

By contrast, the other four novice teachers were the only English teachers in their respective schools, leaving them without an immediate colleague to discuss English teaching. Moreover, the majority reported not attending any formal orientation program prior to commencing their teaching. They indicated that, upon entry, they immediately began classroom teaching and confronted large numbers of students with widely varying ability levels. Only one teacher reported receiving informal orientation, as described:

Data (2)

"It's true, actually, it's not an official orientation program at school. However, informally, senior teachers invite new teachers to observe classes, or new teachers may voluntarily attend classes taught by senior teachers. In this case, the teacher is just getting to know the classroom conditions and observing the teaching techniques of the more experienced teacher. This teaching technique can be used as a reference for new teachers."

All five participants stated that they were given opportunities to engage in various professional development (PD) activities. Examples included training related to the 2013 Curriculum, regular meetings of the Subject Teacher Forum, and seminars or workshops on English language teaching. However, two participants reported that they were unable to participate in PD due to heavy teaching loads. As RS 1 noted:

Data (3)

"I haven't had the opportunity to do self-development. However, I plan to attend workshops, seminars, and training where I can benefit."

Regarding reflective practice and action research, junior secondary (SMP) teachers reported not being actively involved in these activities. Senior secondary (SMA) teachers described several reflective methods they used, including end-of-semester student questionnaires, reflection through the Subject Teacher Forum, collegial discussions, and using supervision and evaluation results from the foundation's board as inputs for reflection. A vocational secondary (SMK) teacher stated that reflection was undertaken after each lesson. Nevertheless, only a few teachers reported having conducted action research, for example, on the use of games and films in instruction. Overall, the

participants appeared unaccustomed to engaging routinely in reflective practice, and research did not feature prominently in their ongoing professional agendas.

Regarding other forms of school support for career development, several encouraging patterns emerged. Four participants stated that their schools provided support by relaxing deadlines and demonstrating understanding when teaching mistakes occurred, allocating sufficient time to build relationships with students, supplying necessary instructional equipment and media, and offering recognition for student achievement. Other participants reported that schools provided facilities such as books, internet access, and language laboratories. In addition, several schools regularly implemented supervision and assessment programs that novice teachers used to evaluate and improve their teaching performance. As one participant stated:

Data (4)

“Fortunately, I regularly experience supervision and assessment by several teachers and Foundation staff. After that, I was provided with information regarding the results, including the weaknesses and strengths that had been identified.”

Based on data (4), the system of supervision and assessment implemented in schools helps scaffold the novice teachers' development. Feedback is evaluative and constructive, identifying gaps as well as strengths in teaching achievements. This allows teachers to reflect critically on the data and to inform revisions to their instruction and their teaching confidence. In this way, ongoing supervision and assessment may, to some extent, compensate for the lack of formal mentoring school programmes, as well as signal that some designed organizational support is effective in maintaining teachers' professional development.

Regarding Professional Development findings, novice teachers reported varied experiences with support and engagement in activities related to their professional growth. While some novice teachers received informal mentoring and participated in discussions with senior colleagues, others—especially those serving as the sole English teacher in their schools—had no professional peers in close proximity. In-service formal professional development activities, such as workshops, seminars, and Subject Teacher Forum meetings, were attended, albeit at times limited due to burdensome teaching assignments. Aspects of teaching, such as reflective practice and action research, were and still remain routine. While some participants were instructed and engaged in classroom-embedded research, others were not. The support offered by institutions through supervision, learning resources, and teaching performance recognition were mainly as supportive constraints, underscoring the role of schools in the ‘in the moment’ professional competence of teaching.

4.2. Challenges

Students' lack of interest in English was one of the most frequently reported challenges as one participant explained.

Data (5)

“Students here seem less enthusiastic in learning English, a passive attitude that appears in their study days, even with fun methods. Perhaps further development methods are needed” (PS1).

This illustrates that, despite teachers' attempts to use engaging approaches, learner motivation in rural contexts remains low, largely because English is not perceived as essential within the community. Such a lack of enthusiasm not only reduces classroom participation but also places additional emotional and instructional pressure on novice teachers, who must find ways to sustain motivation in an environment that does not naturally support it.

In addition to low learner interest, participants consistently described the challenge of teaching mixed-ability classes. One teacher shared,

Data (6)

"Involving students with various levels of English proficiency is quite challenging. Some students have good proficiency in English, while others are complete beginners... I had to adapt my approach to still engage students who had absolutely no command of English. However, at the same time, I also need to consider students who are at the intermediate level" (PS1).

"Facing the challenge of teaching students with various English abilities is quite a difficult situation. Some students can speak English well, while others are still in the beginner stage. There are many challenges, but students' varied abilities are the most challenging. Especially, it is related to determining material that is suitable for students with high abilities and at the same time can be understood by students with low abilities." (PS4)

The accounts received indicate that lesson planning becomes particularly challenging when teachers need to integrate activities for both advanced and novice students. Apart from lesson planning, this situation creates an additional psychological burden for novice teachers, who must balance providing enrichment activities while simultaneously planning remedial instruction for students with severe knowledge gaps. The difficulty in sourcing differentiated materials for teaching amplifies this problem and, to an even greater extent, increases demands on teachers' improvisation and originality. Thus, mixed-ability classrooms require more than pedagogical adaptability; they point to the absence of adequate systemic school support. This highlights the urgent need for contextualised professional development to prepare teachers for the pedagogical complexities of teaching in inclusive settings.

Institutional constraints further magnify these difficulties. One participant explained,

Data (7)

"At school, we were only given one book for the subject. Using the same material for students with varying levels of English proficiency is quite a challenge... We have to include challenging content for students with strong abilities, while still paying attention to those who are still at the beginner stage. Apart from that, we also have to protect students who have difficulty understanding the material" (PS3).

A singular textbook limits lesson design choices, increasing the risk of leaving underperforming students with fewer learning opportunities. This lack of alignment between what the institution offers and what is needed in the classroom becomes even more apparent with novice educators. Novice teachers find themselves in a complicated position: trying to stretch the scant materials they have to cover an unmanageable range of learning needs, all without supplementary materials. For all practical purposes, they will be forced to simplify the lesson for advanced learners or assign grossly overloaded lessons to beginners. The gradual disengagement from the lesson exacerbates class inequity. This dependence on textbooks may well be a symptom of a broader systemic problem in schools. This lack of materials places a serious constraint on new teachers, preventing their full adaptation to the specific context of their teaching.

Low proficiency was also a recurring issue, particularly among students without prior exposure to English. As PS2 explained,

Data (8)

"Most students who don't have an English background rarely speak that language, right? Therefore, when I use English in class, it is quite challenging for them to understand what I explain."

"Often, I find that the majority of them have limited English skills, so I have to give more in-depth and repeated explanations to ensure the material can be understood properly."

Another teacher, PS4, even expressed surprise at the extent of the problem:

"I feel a bit surprised, and this makes me wonder. At first, I thought teaching non-English-speaking students would be a fun experience, but in reality, it was quite challenging. I found that their English skills were lacking, especially when I asked them to read. Their spelling and the way they read is terrible."

These accounts reveal not only the cognitive challenges for students but also the emotional challenges for teachers, whose initial expectations of a stimulating teaching experience often gave way to disappointment when confronted with learners' minimal proficiency. These reflections highlight the gap between teacher expectations and classroom realities, where a lack of prior exposure places cognitive burdens on students and emotional strain on teachers. Instead of being a rewarding teaching context, the low baseline proficiency forced instructors to repeatedly slow down, simplify, and adjust their delivery. This mismatch often left teachers questioning not only their students' preparedness but also their own strategies for managing the diverse ability levels in one classroom.

The issue of critical thinking was also raised, particularly regarding students' reluctance to participate actively. As PS5 explained,

Data (9)

"In conclusion, it can be concluded that students face obstacles in developing critical thinking, and their way of thinking has not been fully formed. Initially, I hoped that students would have the courage to speak up and actively participate in class discussions."

"Because these students are at school for the first time and are new students coming from high school, they lack confidence in speaking, so we often provide language assistance to them so they can participate more actively in class" (PS5).

These reflections show that limited critical thinking skills are not only a cognitive gap but are also tied to learners' transitional stage and lack of confidence, requiring teachers to continuously scaffold participation. This lack of confidence reinforces their passivity, making it harder for teachers to cultivate active engagement. As a result, instructors must adopt strategies of scaffolding and reassurance, gradually building a classroom environment where students feel safe to experiment with ideas, take risks in speaking, and practice the very critical thinking skills expected of them.

Beyond learner-related issues, institutional challenges were also significant. Participants reported inadequate facilities and resources, as described by PS4.

Data (10)

"Here, the treatment of English classes is no different from other classes; facilities for practicing English are not provided, there are no English corners, relevant study plans, or learning or development programs, for example." Similarly, PS2 emphasized, "Supporting tools should be available; moreover, this language lesson often requires media to facilitate the delivery of material and include a pleasant and meaningful impression for students."

Such conditions leave novice teachers reliant primarily on teacher explanation, limiting opportunities for interactive learning and reducing students' motivation. These accounts highlight a systemic gap between institutional support and the pedagogical needs of language education. Without adequate resources, novice teachers are forced to rely heavily on traditional teacher-centered explanations, which restrict interactive and experiential learning. The absence of facilities such as English corners or multimedia support further diminishes the immersive experience necessary for fostering both language proficiency and student engagement. In turn, this lack of infrastructure not only undermines motivation but also hinders teachers' capacity to implement creative or student-centered methodologies.

Syllabus quality was another issue raised. As one teacher noted,

Data (11)

“There is indeed a syllabus here, but it can be said to be bad, gray in nature, irrelevant, and cannot be used as a reference. Teachers cannot follow the syllabus for the specified time in each class session, which is basically arranged in such a way, is unrealistic” (PS3).

“I need to balance between the demands of school and the reality in the classroom. Students are not ready to accept complex material, but schools demand that they can communicate in English, or at least succeed in various tests and understand texts in English.” (PS5)

These reflections suggest that the prescribed syllabus functions more as an administrative requirement than as a practical teaching guide. The vagueness and irrelevance of the content prevent it from being a reliable reference, forcing teachers to improvise while simultaneously meeting rigid institutional demands. This creates a double burden—teachers must navigate unrealistic curricular expectations while also addressing students’ low readiness and limited proficiency. Consequently, rather than supporting teachers, the syllabus becomes an additional source of stress, illustrating how top-down curriculum design can intensify rather than alleviate the challenges faced in under-resourced classrooms.

The findings indicate the broad and diverse challenges that beginner teachers must navigate, including learner challenges and broader contextual challenges. The lack of motivation and minimal exposure to English severely disengaged learners, compelling teachers to overly simplify their instruction and adjust their delivery to the point of frustration. The presence of mixed-ability learners further complicated differentiated lesson planning, thus requiring teachers to provide instructional support to beginners while simultaneously enriching advanced learners, all without sufficient differentiated resources. The absence of supportive frameworks was another institutional constraint that impacted the flexibility and innovation of teachers’ pedagogy, especially when compounded by the use of a single textbook and inadequate infrastructure. The lack of critical and confident thinking among students also hindered the flow of interaction and engagement in a lesson, forcing teachers to provide extensive scaffolding and reassurance. The absence of defined, realistic goals in the learners’ syllabus was yet another workblame phenomenon that increased pressure on beginners, as the expectations placed on them did not align with their actual levels. These findings highlight the need for systemic changes that accompany resources, supportive strategies, and a context-sensitive curriculum, and that are predictable and address systemic gaps in teaching English in low-support contexts.

4.3. Strategies

The qualified teachers encountering learner-related challenges, especially with the diverse range of English abilities, heterogeneous grouping, or mixing of students between the higher and lower tiers of the distribution, were noted as a common practice. One participant provided the following quote.

Data (12)

“When I deliver the material, I always make sure students can work in groups. I combine students with high and low English proficiency in each group, so they can help each other” (PS5).

“I integrate students with different ability levels in one group so that they can support each other” (PS4)

“I consistently place students in groups consisting of students with different English proficiency levels ... so they can help each other and work together” (PS2).

The balancing of different tiers was aimed at fostering the more capable students’ responsibility for mentoring less able peers as a way of learning, and at fostering collaborative synergies that would mitigate the isolation of disengaged students. On the other hand, the teachers’ limitations in addressing students’ diverse individual needs in the English classroom are indicative of the

mindfulness that was brought to the strategy as a more balanced approach to the cognitive demands of the classroom.

Beyond grouping, teachers also adapted materials to match learners' actual levels. The institutional handouts, though provided, were often seen as too difficult. One participant admitted,

Data (13)

"I receive teaching materials from the university ... but I feel that my students are not ready to understand them. Therefore, I provide them with other learning resources that can make them more active and comfortable in the learning process" (PS2).

This indicates that novice teachers used their agency to soften institutional demands in ways that made lessons more manageable. Student attitudes further complicated the issue. In response to this, participants established classroom rules and consequences at the start of the semester.

Data (14)

"In the first meeting, I always communicate the rules to the students and hold discussions about the consequences if the rules are violated" (PS3).

This response illustrates the teachers' awareness of the importance of setting limits and expectations from the beginning. By proposing rules as a collaborative agreement rather than a unilateral imposition, they aimed to create a sense of accountability among students while positioning themselves as facilitators rather than rigid authoritarian figures. The mention of consequences demonstrates an effort to balance fairness and firmness, signaling to students that discipline is a shared responsibility. At the same time, this practice implies that novice teachers were attuned to their own positionality in the classroom, where the small age gap could create ambiguity about authority, making rule clarification an essential step to garner respect and provide structure.

To stimulate students' limited critical thinking skills, teachers encouraged group discussions and speaking practice. One participant explained,

Data (15)

"I have a habit of organizing group discussions at every meeting and always try to provide activities that encourage students' active participation in speaking" (PS4).

This statement highlights how novice teachers positioned group discussion as their primary strategy for fostering speaking practice and stimulating students' engagement. The choice of discussion probably stems from the ease and practicality of this approach, particularly when resources are scarce and students are still building their confidence. However, this might also indicate that beginner teachers tend to stick to safe, familiar strategies and are less willing to try new activities. It shows an effort to support engagement, especially when teachers appear to value consistency and are careful in constructing students' critical thinking, even if the approaches are still somewhat limited in range.

Institutional challenges also demanded creative strategies. Teachers collaborated with colleagues to design modules more suited to non-English majors:

Data (16)

"I collaborated with five teachers, including the coordinator and my colleagues, to make the module. Together, we compile several materials that we think are suitable to be taught to primary students who do not have an English background" (PS3).

This collaboration and negotiation further illustrate how teachers took initiative in response to institutional constraints. The development of additional modules to fill the gap between the mandated syllabi and the students' needs is an example of this. So, the initiative is to hold regular meetings with coordinators. Such meetings support alignment, if not integration, of teaching

practices with broader expectations. While there are still systemic limitations, these actions clearly reflect the collective solutions that these beginner teachers sought and their willingness to engage in dialogue. This illustrates the systemic constraints within which these teachers navigate, demonstrating their resilience and adaptability.

Novice EFL teachers encountered classroom and organizational challenges, which they addressed with adaptable, collaborative approaches. In response to students' different proficiency levels, they used heterogeneous grouping, where stronger students were allowed to assist weaker ones, and to address the problem of overly difficult institutional handouts, they provided more appropriate supplementary materials. They also developed classroom rules to establish boundaries and promote accountability, while group discussions were held regularly to encourage students to speak and build confidence. Outside the classroom, teachers worked with colleagues and coordinators in a more integrated way to design specific modules and adjust expectations, which helped them overcome the challenge of balancing what the institution required with what the students really needed.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the professional development, challenges, and strategies of novice EFL teachers in rural Indonesian contexts, and when juxtaposed with prior research, several key insights emerge. In terms of professional development, the reliance on informal mentoring from senior colleagues reflects a common trend in contexts where formal mentoring programs are absent. This aligns with Farrell (2003), who emphasized that novice teachers often rely on collegial support and informal learning opportunities to navigate their early years of teaching. Similarly, Adeoye et al. (2025) highlighted that the lack of induction and structured mentoring remains a critical gap in many education systems, particularly in resource-constrained schools. The absence of routine engagement with reflective practice and action research further suggests that, as Nissilä (2005) argued, reflection must be cultivated through systemic support rather than left to individual initiative. In contexts such as Indonesia, where the research culture is still developing, the role of schools in scaffolding reflective practice becomes even more vital (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019). This study also supports the proposition that schools and educational institutions should invest in structured mentoring and professional development to address the difficulties these teachers face.

Regarding the challenges, the results strongly support earlier findings on the difficulties of teaching in rural and under-resourced contexts. The issue of low student motivation aligns with Holguín and Morales (2016), who noted that rural learners often perceive English as irrelevant to their lives, thereby reducing enthusiasm and engagement. This further underscores the need for context-sensitive educational methods that are aware of and address the individual cultural and socio-economic factors shaping students' mindsets towards English. At the same time, the current research illustrates how the levels of proficiency observed in students, especially those with limited exposure to English-speaking communication contexts, reflect the barriers faced by students from weaker backgrounds in mastering English language competence. This further underscores the need to use context-sensitive educational methods to address the diverse backgrounds of students in rural areas. The problem of mixed-ability classrooms has also been widely documented. Sharplin et al. (2011) emphasized that heterogeneous proficiency levels make lesson planning highly complex, often leaving novice teachers underprepared to differentiate instruction effectively. Likewise, Kolaj (2022) confirmed that managing diverse student needs requires advanced pedagogical flexibility, something novice teachers typically lack. Even though such approaches are helpful in meeting short-term classroom needs, they further reinforce the need for more intensive staff development in differentiated instruction and the creation of resources relevant to mixed-ability classrooms.

The findings on low proficiency levels resonate with Lesaux (2012), who observed that students with little to no prior exposure to English struggle significantly with basic literacy skills. Haryadi & Wilang (2025) similarly reported that in Indonesian contexts, students without an English background demonstrate weaknesses across all language skills, confirming the teachers' surprise and frustration in this study. The negative sentiments expressed by participants resonate with the idea that students perceive English as unnecessary, especially when it is taught as a general subject with limited practical relevance. The criticisms by participants regarding a vague, impractical syllabus echo those of Coady (2020), who, along with numerous others, noted that poorly designed, top-down curriculum reforms, especially in under-resourced settings, fail because they impose disconnected, unrealistic expectations. Institutional constraints, such as inadequate resources and unrealistic curriculum expectations, also reflect systemic issues that undermine the effectiveness of rural English teaching. These data further support the idea that the process of curriculum change requires more attention to the rural classroom than either current or proposed curricula call for.

The strategies in question, including heterogeneous grouping, classroom rules, and group discussions, indicate limited yet adaptive practices. These strategies resonate with Al-Naimi et al. (2020), who described such practices as "survival strategies" among novice teachers, which, although helpful in reducing classroom pressure, do not foster true pedagogical innovation. Additionally, the use of peer collaboration through grouping, as described, aligns with Vygotskian scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978), in which more capable students assist weaker students. Collaborative creation of supplementary modules along with teacher partners and the provision of additional materials are also noteworthy.

This research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on novice teachers in rural settings by providing insight into the challenges faced by English language teachers in Indonesia. Unlike other research on teachers in urban areas, this research focuses not only on the challenges faced by teachers in rural areas but also on how the lack of resources and student motivation affect the overall teaching process in rural schools. The results identify an urgent need for improvements in mentoring and professional development.

The findings of this study have several implications for both policy and practice. For teacher education programs, the results emphasize the need to provide pre-service teachers with stronger preparation in managing mixed-ability classrooms, designing adaptive materials, and fostering critical thinking. Incorporating more practice-based training and mentoring into teacher education curricula could help reduce the gap between theory and the realities novice teachers face. For schools and institutions, the study underscores the importance of establishing structured mentoring and supervision programs and providing access to adequate facilities, resources, and realistic curricula. Policymakers should recognize that imposing top-down syllabi without considering contextual realities risks overburdening teachers and demotivating learners. Finally, the findings imply that sustainable teacher growth cannot rely solely on individual resilience; systemic reforms are needed to institutionalize professional development, cultivate reflective practices, and support novice teachers in evolving from survival strategies toward more innovative, research-informed pedagogy.

6. Conclusion

The initial period of teaching posed substantial challenges for the participants. These challenges were both student-related and institutional, and were primarily faced by novice English as a Foreign Language teachers, with little, mostly informal institutional support. Related to students, difficulties included unmotivated and unevenly ready students, variability in proficiency levels, negative attitudes toward English, and weak critical thinking skills in the context of the mixed-ability classroom. Compounding these difficulties, poorly developed institutional frameworks and misaligned high-

performance expectations added pressure, manifesting in inadequate facilities and teaching media and in superficial, unclear, and unrealistic syllabi.

To some extent, these challenges explain the predominance of classroom-level pragmatic strategies, such as the adaptation of materials to students' differing levels of proficiency, the formation of heterogeneous ability groups with the peer support model, the establishment of order through rules and consequences, and the design of tasks centered around interaction and discussion. At the school level, teachers sought collegial collaboration, especially with senior English teachers and coordinators, to co-prepare relevant modules for non-English majors and to interpret expectations from the school. While some professional development opportunities (for example, curriculum training, teacher forums, seminars, and workshops) were available, heavy teaching loads, limited formal induction, and the absence of designated mentors constrained sustained engagement in reflective practice and action research.

7. Suggestion

This study's suggestions emphasize the need to strengthen early-career teacher learning in rural and resource-constrained contexts through targeted institutional support. Structured induction and mentoring programs with regular observations and feedback are crucial, as are syllabi that are realistic, learner-centered, and appropriate for students with limited English proficiency. Providing novice teachers with protected time for reflective practice and practitioner inquiry, as well as ensuring access to relevant facilities, media, and instructional resources, would also enhance teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, building communities of practice—such as Subject Teacher Forums—can reduce professional isolation while sustaining ongoing pedagogical development.

Despite these insights, the study is limited in scope, focusing only on novice EFL teachers in Indonesia within a small number of institutions and relying solely on interview data. These constraints reduce the transferability of the findings and may overlook the diversity of novice teacher experiences across different regions and socio-economic settings. To address this, future research should expand geographically and institutionally, incorporate participants from varied backgrounds, and employ multiple data-collection methods—such as classroom observations, artifacts, surveys, and longitudinal approaches. Such designs would enable deeper triangulation and yield a more comprehensive understanding of novice EFL teachers' challenges, coping strategies, and professional growth trajectories.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Fita Faridah: conceptualization, literature review, data collection, data analysis, and original manuscript preparation; Pratiwi Retnaningdyah: conceptualization and data analysis; Ali Mustofa: data analysis and review-editing, and writing.

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