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**Submission date:** 04-Jul-2023 09:46AM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 2126247843

**File name:** 17101-43889-1-PB\_2.pdf (332.69K)

**Word count:** 6346

**Character count:** 35240

## External Factors Affect English Learning in Rural Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Study

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### Article History

Received: 07 January 2023  
Reviewed: 28 January 2023  
Accepted: 17 March 2023  
Published: 30 April 2023

### Highlights

The implementation of English teaching and learning activities for young learners in Indonesian rural elementary schools, still requires evaluation and support from all parties, especially the government, in order to be carried out properly and equitably.

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this study was to discover some external factors that influence the difficulties of teaching and learning English in rural schools for young learners. To obtain detailed data or information, data was collected in this study through observation and interviews using a qualitative research method and a type of case study. The research was conducted at an AI Fatch elementary school in the Silo sub-district of Jember Regency, East Java. The findings revealed that several external factors influence the difficulty of teaching and learning English for young students in rural schools, including 1) the school's location is far from urban areas, making it difficult for the community to reach it; 2) inadequate school infrastructure; 3) inadequate school facilities cannot support the continuity of the English teaching and learning process; 4) a lack of learning resources for students and teachers; 5) the language barrier, which is influenced by the community surrounding the school, which speaks the local language more frequently, makes it difficult for students to understand Indonesian as a medium of instruction in the teaching process.

**Keywords:** teaching and learning English, young learners, rural schools, external factors

### Introduction

Education is very important to produce superior human resources as well as prepare a golden generation for the Indonesian nation. According to Rabiah (2018), young learners are still a valuable asset to Indonesia that could determine the nation's fate in the future. In 2045, Indonesia will commemorate the 100th year of independence, and the student is intended to have an exceptional skill and character. For this reason, the learning provided by educators must be of high quality in order to be a provision for students to achieve meaningful education as according to Madani (2019), the quality of education is intractably linked to the proficiency of the teacher. Teachers' qualifications in terms of educational levels accomplished, quality, and teaching differ considerably across the globe, which makes it challenging to verify the quality of education.

The imbalance of education in Indonesia demonstrates that education in Indonesia is still

in its early stages. This is also reliable with Rulandari (2021), which states that quality education at the national level still leaves homework such as responsibilities, data is received from non-government parties, and the education participation process itself. There are still many areas in Indonesia where education tends to lag. The government sees promoting education in rural areas as a shared responsibility that must be accomplished as a kind of patriotism (Febriana et al., 2018). These are recognized as 3T areas, which means *Tertinggal, Terluar, dan Terdepan* (Disadvantaged, Outermost and Frontier Areas). With these challenges, everyone has a responsibility, especially the government's to improve education in Indonesia, particularly in the 3T areas. As a result, the Indonesian government sends thousands of teachers in various subjects to rural areas every year in an effort to meet the requirements for teachers through various programs (Febriana et al., 2018). The unequal distribution of education in Indonesia surely has an influence on how students learn in schools, one of which is learning English. Today, English is one of the most important languages in the world (McKay, 2016). Currently, language skills are very important, one of which is the ability to speak English. This ability can be useful when preparing for work. Learning English in a rural school presents numerous challenges and difficulties. English has long been taught in Indonesia. According to Musiman et al. (2021), one of the local subjects for elementary schools is English. In the 2013 curriculum, English is no longer listed as a local subject in elementary schools. English, on the other hand, can be taught as an extracurricular activity in elementary schools. However, this does not guarantee that students, especially the young learners, will have difficulty learning English. This is also in accordance with the findings Azmy (2020), Musiman et al. (2021), that teaching English at a young age in Indonesia is arguably inefficient because of inadequate teacher competence, unrelated curriculum content, and uninteresting teaching methods.

The challenge facing Indonesia in the education sector is the large geographical location and large number of rural areas in Indonesia. Teachers in urban schools have a lot of access to instructional materials, while teachers in rural areas often lack instructional materials that can help them deliver classroom lessons (Febriana et al., 2018). This condition makes the teaching and learning process monotonous. Rural schools have characteristics that the number of students in each class tends to be fewer and the location of the school is far from urban areas (McCracken et al., 1991; Harlina & Nur Yusuf, 2020). In addition, Harlina and Nur Yusuf (2020), mention several characteristics of rural areas according to UNESCO 2005, including: the remoteness of rural areas, which are usually far from urban centres; adverse topographical conditions such as road conditions, bridges etc.; access to various information technologies is very limited; and transport infrastructure such as buses, taxis; access to services and facilities such as electricity, water and sanitation; the health, education and economic status of people below the poverty line. Furthermore, rural schools are found to be inferior to their urban counterparts in terms of instruction (Shikalepo, 2020; Khulel, 2021). Moreover, the implementation of English instruction in elementary schools is still constrained by government policies.

Discussing how to teach English to young students is an incredibly interesting topic in the world of education. According to Astutik and Munir (2022), English as a foreign language has been a concern in Indonesia since the early 1990s, especially in the area of primary education.

The curriculum in Indonesia has undergone several changes in its implementation. Many curriculum changes have occurred in Indonesia, including the 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, and 2013 curricula (Rizqi, 2018; Ardaya et al., 2022). However, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) is currently implementing the new curricula for the 2022/2023 academic year. The Minister of Education and Culture's Decree No. 56 of 2022 necessitates a new curriculum known as the “*Kurikulum Merdeka*” (Sevrika & Elmiati, 2022). According to research data, Indonesia has been having to contend with a learning crisis for quite a long time, which has had an impact on the education system in Indonesia and resulted in disparities in academic achievement (Priantini et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a lack of equity in education, which has been largely caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has completely changed the teaching and learning process. According to Sevrika and Elmiati (2022), the English language learning policy reappeared in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, but it was restricted to grades 1 until grade 4.

Apart from the curriculum policy, there are other factors that affect the difficulty of teaching and learning English for young learners. Education is an intentional and planned activity that aims to create a learning environment and process in which students actively develop their potential. According to Aslamiah (2020), not all students can develop the same cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities. As a result, students face various challenges. In this way, English teaching must be adjusted. According to Larasaty et al. (2022), teaching and learning English for young learners differs greatly from teaching and learning English for adults. Furthermore, Mulyati (2019), Larasaty et al. (2022), stated that young learner's world is a world of play, and they prefer to learn while playing. Several factors have been recognized as the causal factors behind difficulties in teaching English to young learners. According to Aslamiah (2020), from an objective perspective, learning difficulties can be influenced by a variety of factors, both internal and external. Internal factors that influence the difficulty of learning English include: 1) perception; 2) memory ability; 3) cognitive processes; and 4) attention. While the external factors of learning difficulties are associated with two circumstances. First, consider the situation outside and prior to school. Second, consider the situation at school. Meanwhile, according to Hakim and Solihati (2021), the causes of difficulty teaching English to students at the primary school level are: 1) lack of access to the use of English in students' real daily lives in the community; 2) related to words in English where the spelling makes it different from the pronunciation; 3) the competency of the English teacher who is only a class teacher and is appointed the task of teaching English; and 4) the accessibility of teaching materials or textbooks for teaching English. Because of that, English teachers for young learners are confronted with a challenge. This is also reliable with Tambunsaribu and Galingging (2021), which states that teachers must understand the factors that influence students' learning processes and outcomes because learning difficulties are affected by these factors.

Previous research on difficulties in learning English in rural schools in Febriana et al. (2018), found that several factors, including infrastructure, learning resources, language barriers, parents' mindsets, teacher shortages, student competencies, and student mindsets influence difficulties in learning English. These results are based on research conducted by

previous researchers who also explained that these factors were obtained based on the teaching experience of several teachers teaching in rural schools. Meanwhile, in Cahyati & Madya (2019), stated that teaching English in primary schools is difficult because how to teach children differs from how to teach adult learners and also has many challenges. According to this finding, the difficulty in teaching English to young learners is caused by two factors. The first factor is internal factors, such as pedagogy, motivation, and identity. The second factor is external factors, which include textbooks, learning resources, teachers' English proficiency, and class size. These factors were derived from previous research conducted in several elementary schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Musiman et al. (2021), found several factors that make teaching English to young students in Indonesia difficult, especially in schools in rural areas, in his study titled "EYL in Indonesia: Implementation, Problems, and Challenges". There are some difficulties with this implementation. These include government policies, teacher qualifications, curriculum, and educational facilities. This is based on a review of several previous research sources that discussed the same topic in order to strengthen their findings.

According to the results of previous research, the researchers were interested in conducting pre-observations which were conducted from March to May at Al Fatch Elementary School, it was found that many students' English test scores were not good. In addition, it is difficult to communicate in class when learning English, and the teacher cannot convey the material well. So that students do not understand the material provided by the teacher. This has been happening since before the Covid-19 pandemic until now. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, learning English at the school could not be carried out properly due to limited online learning facilities in the school area. Many factors both internal and external influence the teaching and learning English process in rural schools. Researchers focus at external factors that can affect the process of teaching and learning English at Al Fatch elementary school, which is in a rural area, in this study. As a result, the purpose of this research is to find out about the external factors that lead to difficulties in learning English among teachers and students at Al Fatch elementary school by using theory from Kuchah (2018) about teaching English to young learners in difficult circumstances.

### **Method**

A qualitative research design is used in this study to explore and gather data on external factors that influence the difficulty of teaching and learning English for young students in rural schools. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research contains exploring and fully understanding the meaning of individuals or groups who are social or human problems. This study used a case study in an elementary school in a rural area. A case study, according to Creswell (2014), is an in-depth analysis of a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals conducted by the researchers. With this statement, this study aims to find out about the external factors that influence the difficulties in teaching and learning English faced by teachers and their students in rural elementary school.

This research was conducted at Al Fatch elementary school. In Karangharjo, Jember, East Java. This school has a history of being a rural school with lack educational standards, particularly in the English subject. Thus, the English teacher from Al Fatch elementary school

took part in this study as the informant. The researchers collected the data from March to July through observation and interview to investigate the external factors that influence English teaching and learning process in this school. Observations were made to see the environment and school culture by using Kuchah's framework, then interviews with the informant were carried out by researchers to confirm the data from the observations. The researchers took several steps to analyse the data in this study. First, went over all the observations' field notes. Then, using Kuchah's framework, researchers classified external factors that impede the process of learning English. Third, crossed-checking observation data with informant interview data. The researchers then wrote a report and reached a conclusion.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

Language teachers all over the world work in a wide range of situations and face a wide range of challenges on a daily basis, which defines the situation in terms of teaching and learning English (Kuchah, 2018). This situation affects both teachers and students at Al Fatch Elementary School. Teachers and students at Al Fatch Elementary School encountered the following factors while teaching and learning English: 1) school location; 2) school infrastructure; 3) school-based learning facilities; 4) learning resources; and 5) language barrier. These factors are described as follows:

#### *School Location*

Rural areas in Indonesia are synonymous with people who work as farmers, and these rural locations are filled with agricultural and plantation areas. as found in Silo District, Jember Regency, East Java Province. Even though it is on the island of Java, there are still rural areas, and they are classified as the 3T areas: *Tertinggal, Terluar, and Terdepan* (disadvantaged, outermost, and frontier areas). There are still many plantations to be found in the area, and the condition of schools in the area is still poor. One of them is Al Fatch Elementary School, which is in Karangharjo village, which is still in the Silo district area.



Fig. 1 The school's environment

The school building is in a plantation area. In addition, residents' houses in the area are quite far apart because they pass through forests and gardens. In addition, access to schools is also quite difficult. Because it is far from the city, it takes a lot of energy to get to the school.

The road to the school is still rocky and slightly uphill because it is in a highland area. Cars also find it rather difficult to access this area because there is only one path that can be taken.

### ***School Infrastructure***

The Al Fatch elementary school's location in a plantation area has an impact on the school's buildings and infrastructure. There are no lights in each class; only the teacher's room and bathroom have lights. The school is not a new school. However, this happened because the school was not managed by the local education office but was still managed by a foundation established by the school's owner's family. The infrastructure at the school is still lacking; one might even say it is inadequate, because there are still classrooms or rooms with perforated roofs, mossy walls, peeling paint, and even a shortage of classrooms or study rooms due to limited land. It can also interfere with the teaching and learning process of English because both students and teachers are not comfortable with this situation. The following is an overview of the condition of one of the classes:



Fig. 2 Mossy classroom walls and peeling paint

The school was established as a forum to seek knowledge for residents around the area. Since most of the people in the area make a living as laborers on the plantations, it can be said that their income is low. Therefore, the school has never demanded that parents pay for school fees. Due to the lack of income for schools, the school infrastructure is not well and properly maintained.

### ***Learning Facilities at School***

Learning facilities, especially in schools, are very important for carrying out learning. Especially in English lessons, which sometimes require some learning facilities, Al Fatch elementary school learning facilities are still inadequate and far from feasible. This is evidenced by the inadequate classrooms, blackboards that still use chalk, the unavailability of projectors, and the fact that the sound system needed to provide material related to listening skills is also not available. Besides that, the school area is still constrained by the internet network at the school. Due to the limited learning facilities in schools, it causes teachers and students to carry out English teaching and learning activities in a simple way, and the results of learning cannot be carried out optimally.



Fig.3 Teaching and learning English activity

### ***Learning Resources***

In the teaching and learning of English, learning resources (textbooks or modules) are needed. At Al Fatch elementary school, even so, the teacher does not have or use a special module designed as teaching material. Likewise, not all students at the school have English textbooks. This occurred as a result of the government's inequitable distribution of limited school fees and textbook assistance. The lack of learning resources undoubtedly makes it difficult for them to learn English properly. As a result, the teacher can only try by writing or reading the material provided on the board, and students can only try by writing material in their respective exercise books.

During English lessons, students tend to only listen to the teacher's explanation because there are no textbooks for them. In addition, the teacher only conveys material obtained from dictionaries or books that have been around for a long time and are still used today without developing it into more innovative learning materials. For elementary school students, this makes learning monotonous and uninteresting.

### ***Language Barrier***

The language barrier is one of many external factors that could contribute to the difficulty of learning English in rural schools. Communities around the school primarily communicate in Madurese, the regional language. Because of their habit of communicating in the local language, they find it difficult to understand Indonesian, which is the language of instruction that must be used in school. Under these circumstances, it is difficult and challenging for a teacher to convey subject matter, particularly in English lessons. When teaching English to students at school, teachers should indeed explain in three languages (English, Indonesian, and regional languages) at the same time.

### ***Discussion***

The implementation of teaching English to young learners in Indonesia is not mandatory although teaching English to young students (TEYL) in Indonesia has been implemented in several schools since 1994 (Khulel, 2021). Rural or regional English language instruction has recently gained significant attention, particularly in developing nations. The demand of English as an international language makes EFL countries take more attentions in providing continuous improvements in ELT practices in rural regions (Amin, Daniel, Macdonald, & Jafar, 2018). This is also related to the existence of an English language learning policy for young learners

in Indonesia. Learning English in Indonesia is something that is rarely given to young learners. This happens because it is related to the policy of learning English at all levels of education which is still the autonomy of each country (Astutik & Munir, 2022). As is well known, some elementary schools in Indonesia are still using the 2013 curriculum this academic year, while others have already implemented the independent curriculum. With this, some schools still exist, some do not provide English lessons, and others only provide English lessons in certain classes (class 1 - class 4). This occurred due to a misunderstanding of English teaching policies for young learners in Indonesia, and some schools continue to believe that English lessons for elementary school students are only local content.

According to Sulistiyo et al. (2020), English as a local content or chosen subject is defined as a school subject that does not have a mandated or approved national curriculum. Although English is an international language, primary schools in Indonesia are not required to provide English lessons to their students in the absence of a policy regarding English learning for young learners. Teachers and students in Indonesia face a variety of problems and challenges when it comes to language teaching and learning (Jon et al., 2021). These issues and challenges can be caused by a variety of factors, one of which is the presence of external factors in the school environment. English lessons at Al Fatch elementary school are no longer a local content lesson, but rather a mandatory subject that students must learn. However, it was discovered that there are still many external factors that influence difficulties in learning English in this school, particularly for young students in rural schools.

Rural areas are known for a lack of socioeconomic facilities such as adequate education, adequate health care, adequate transportation, marketing facilities, and even electricity (Dube, 2020; Kusuma, 2022). With the above understanding, it is possible to describe how the conditions surrounding the school environment in rural areas can affect the difficulties of teaching and learning English, particularly for young students. According to Kuchah (2018), such occurrences in the field demonstrate that there are situations beyond the control of teachers and students that have a significant impact on their daily experience of teaching and learning. If this is the case, this situation exists in large quantities where ELT occurs and thus requires more attention. Kuchah (2018), said that the concept of difficulty in language education is becoming more complex. The concept also includes micro-level (in language classes and schools) and meso-level (in local communities) constraints that affect teaching and learning. One of them is the location of the school as well as the school environment and about school infrastructure.

Various difficulties faced by teachers and students while teaching and learning English in rural schools include, among other things, the school's location in a rural area surrounded by forests and plantations. Besides that, the location of the school in the middle of the forest and plantations causes difficult access to the school. Based on the facts on the ground, a rocky road is still found and uphill to go to school. This also causes a lack of information obtained because not many people can access the location of the school. This encourages consideration of the public's perspective on various urban and rural schools. Rural schools typically have fewer students and lower tuition fees than urban schools (Howley et al., 2009; Harlina & Nur Yusuf,

2020). On the ground, even so, this is a fact. Rural schools typically have fewer students and offer reduced or free tuition.

The second factor is inadequate school infrastructure. Infrastructure plays an important role in the teaching and learning process. According to Romlah and Latief (2021), human resources and school infrastructure complement each other in terms of improving education quality for students and educational development. A proper infrastructure helps students to be effective in the teaching and learning process. The process of teaching and learning in rural Indonesian schools usually takes place with inadequate infrastructure. This is because most schools in rural areas are newer schools with limited facilities (Febriana et al., 2018). However, the statement is slightly different from the one at Al Fatch elementary school. The inadequate infrastructure at the school is caused by many factors, one of them is that the school management foundation does not require parents to pay school fees. It is also because the parents of students do not have a lot of money to send their children to school. In addition, it is undeniable that the school's administrative system is also not well implemented, causing the development of school infrastructure to be hampered. Although it often receives financial assistance from the government, it is not implemented properly.

The third factor is insufficient learning facilities. Kuchah (2018), stated that the implementation of free and compulsory primary education in many developing countries has resulted in an exponential increase in the number of children attending primary school without a corresponding increase in human, material, and financial resources. These financial difficulties will also have an impact on learning facilities that support the teaching and learning of English. Learning facilities are external supporting media that must exist for the learning process to be successful. This also reliable with Musiman et al. (2021), the learning process will be more effective if all parties involved, particularly the school and its facilities, support it. Therefore, as much as possible every school must provide adequate learning facilities so that the teaching and learning process runs well. In the Undang - Undang Republik Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, article 45 paragraph 1 explains that each formal and non-formal education unit must provide facilities and infrastructure that meet educational needs in accordance with the growth and development of physical potential, intellectual, social, emotional intelligence, and the psyche of students. Vice versa. if the lack of learning facilities can be a factor that causes difficulties in learning. On the other hand, having adequate learning facilities, both at home and at school, will support the achievement of good learning outcomes (Habsyi, 2020). On the other hand, because the location of the school is surrounded by forests and plantations, internet signal is difficult to reach. Whereas apart from books, students can access information and resources online, and they can also connect with other students and form collaborative teams with other course participants (Putri & Fatimah, 2022).

The lack of learning resources for students is another external factor complicating the process of teaching and learning English in rural schools. Another problem, according to Kuchah (2018), is a lack of teaching materials; handbooks and textbooks are almost non-existent. In fact, the availability of learning resources is the most important aspect of English teaching and learning. This is in line with Cahyati and Madya (2019), that textbooks play an

important role in assisting learners to acquire English knowledge. However, as happened in rural elementary schools, this is not the case. Munifatullah (2014), Musiman et al. (2021), discovered that English teachers in rural areas were isolated from sources of information and support from schools and other related parties, and that they experienced misperceptions about their needs in English class practice. According to Cahyati and Madya (2019), the Indonesian government has decided to use textbooks, but does not restrict other uses that can help teachers teach lessons. However, when it comes to facts on the ground, the elementary school lacks sufficient internet access or other learning facilities (such as public libraries) to visit for teachers and students to obtain information on English learning resources that can be used.

The difficulty of teaching and learning English in rural schools is also greatly influenced by the language barrier. According to Nufus (2018), most people in Indonesia speak Indonesian as their mother tongue, and English is considered a foreign language. Indonesian must be used throughout Indonesia as a cooperative language, so that Indonesian language skills in the teaching and learning process play an important role in the world of education (Vasantan & Manggu, 2019). One of the external factors to students learning English is the rural community's habit of speaking or communicating in the local language in the elementary school environment. Musiman et al. (2021), stated that the ability to communicate in English is a very difficult mission in Indonesia because of the focus placed on the national or even regional languages. Because the people around the school communicate in a mixed language, namely Indonesian and their local language, Madurese, which they use more frequently, students and teachers in elementary schools there struggle to communicate effectively when interacting in English teaching and learning activities. Meanwhile, to provide a high-quality and equitable education to children from low-income families, particularly in multilingual contexts where the language of instruction is a barrier to parental involvement in the education of children whose parents were not educated in their school language (Gfeller and Robinson, 1998; Bamgbose, 2014; Williams and Cooke, 2002; Kuchah, 2018). Because of the influence of these habits, elementary school students' communication with both friends and teachers is undoubtedly influenced. In fact, they are sometimes cautious and unable to communicate in Indonesian. To maximize teaching, when the teacher explains English subject matter, the teacher must translate back to the local languages.

### **Conclusion**

The process of teaching and learning English in Indonesian rural elementary schools differs greatly from that of urban elementary schools. Several times, the government has attempted to maximize English learning at elementary school level by changing curriculum policies that aim to adapt to the school's field conditions. However, it appears that this cannot be implemented optimally. Many elementary schools in Indonesia's rural areas are still experiencing a decrease in English education. One reason is that external factors, particularly in rural areas, make it difficult for young students to learn English. According to research conducted at Al Fatch elementary school, there are several external factors that influence the difficulties of teaching and learning English, including the location of schools in rural areas surrounded by forests and plantations. This is difficult for them because it is difficult for them to reach or access outside

of the community. The second reason is a lack of school infrastructure to support the continuation of English learning. The third is because of learning facilities in schools that are still inadequate, affecting the difficulty of teaching and learning activities in English. Because learning facilities have a significant impact on whether a student learns. Another external factor is the lack of learning resources, even though they must be present when engaging in teaching and learning activities, particularly English lessons. The last external factor encountered there is the influence of language constraints, which have become a habit of students, teachers, and their parents who live in the school environment. Based on these factors, it appears that elementary schools in rural areas continue to face numerous challenges when it comes to teaching and learning English. Many parties must pay close attention and lend a helping hand to ensure that English lessons for young students in rural schools operate properly.

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