



Challenges of an English Teacher in Teaching at The Best School in a Rural Area

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the challenges faced by an English teacher and the strategies used to overcome them at MA NWDI Lepak, recognized as *the best school in a rural area* of East Lombok. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this research explored the teacher's real experiences through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The findings revealed three major challenges in English teaching: low student motivation, varied levels of language proficiency, and limited learning facilities. To address these, the teacher implemented adaptive strategies such as brainstorming, elicitation, scaffolding, group learning, differentiated support, and delayed error correction. These approaches demonstrated creativity and student-centered teaching that fostered learning despite infrastructural constraints. The study concludes that the success of English teaching in rural schools depends not on advanced facilities but on the teacher's creativity, innovation, and adaptability, and recommends that rural teacher development programs emphasize context-based pedagogical training to enhance effective, communicative, and contextualized English instruction.

Keywords: *Challenges, Strategies, English Teacher, Rural Area*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, English has become an indispensable global language that serves not only as a tool of international communication but also as a means of accessing science, technology, and education (Cahyati, 2015; Sahnan, 2024). In Indonesia, English functions as the first foreign language and is included in the national curriculum from primary to tertiary levels (Purnamawati & Abbas, 2024). The primary aim of English education is to prepare students to communicate effectively and to compete in global academic and professional environments (Damayanti, Yusuf, & Purnamawati, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of English Language Teaching (ELT) depends largely on teachers as key agents of educational change. Teachers are not only language instructors but also motivators, facilitators, and curriculum implementers who must adapt to their students' social and cultural contexts (Harlina & Yusuf,

2020). The school environment whether urban or rural profoundly shapes the teaching process and learning outcomes (Weran, Pratama, & Yusuf, 2025). In rural settings, teachers often face complex challenges such as low motivation, heterogeneous student abilities, and limited resources (Widyahening, Kurniawan, & Maulana, 2024).

Interestingly, not all rural schools perform poorly. Several have achieved excellence despite their resource limitations. These institutions are categorized as *sekolah unggul pedesaan* (high-performing rural schools) and are distinguished by strong leadership, disciplined learning culture, community involvement, and committed teachers (Nurhayati, 2022). Their success stories indicate that educational excellence is not solely determined by facilities but by the quality of teaching, pedagogical innovation, and moral foundation (Azano & Stewart, 2016). This phenomenon warrants deeper academic attention because it reflects an important educational paradox: how rural schools with modest

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infrastructure can achieve high standards in English language education.

Literature Review on Rural Excellent Schools

Previous studies on rural education in Indonesia have mostly focused on schools with serious deficiencies rather than on those achieving excellence (Puspitasari, 2020; Laila, Adityarini, & Maryadi, 2023). These studies consistently report issues such as poor infrastructure, limited access to technology, and students' low English proficiency. However, recent findings indicate that some rural schools have managed to excel academically due to their teachers' adaptability and the community's support (Nurhayati, 2022; Harlina & Yusuf, 2021).

High-performing rural schools typically exhibit several key characteristics: (1) visionary leadership, (2) a strong culture of discipline and responsibility, (3) active parent and community participation, and (4) high teacher commitment to student development (Azano & Stewart, 2016). These elements create a unique educational ecosystem where teachers' dedication compensates for infrastructural limitations. As pointed out by Ulya, Rahman, & Hartati (2025), the success of rural schools often depends on teachers' ability to contextualize learning, integrate local wisdom, and apply communicative teaching approaches suited to students' realities.

However, little is known about how these conditions specifically affect English teachers, whose work requires mastery of not only pedagogy but also global language exposure. Teaching English in rural schools demands innovation because students often perceive English as irrelevant to their daily lives (Handayani, Kurniawati, & Santoso, 2025). Teachers must therefore design lessons that are meaningful, contextual, and engaging while maintaining linguistic accuracy and moral integrity (Sujarwo, Arifin, & Rahmawati, 2024).

Previous Research and Identified Gaps

A review of existing studies reveals several research gaps regarding the experiences of English teachers in *high-performing rural schools*.

First, most prior studies examine rural schools from a deficit perspective, emphasizing challenges in underperforming institutions rather than successful ones (Harlina & Yusuf, 2021; Puspitasari, 2020). There remains limited investigation into how English teachers contribute to excellence in schools that have already achieved recognition despite rural constraints (Nurhayati, 2022).

Second, the majority of studies address either teacher challenges or school excellence in isolation. For example, Weran et al. (2025) focused on motivation in rural learning, while Laila et al. (2023) discussed teacher adaptation strategies. Few studies integrate both

dimensions to understand how *teacher challenges and institutional success* interact dynamically in rural contexts.

Third, the religious dimension of rural schools particularly those affiliated with *Nahdlatul Wathan (NW)* has received minimal scholarly attention. NW-based institutions are unique because they integrate Islamic values with formal academic education, shaping not only students' character but also teachers' pedagogical orientations (Atmowardoyo & Sakkir, 2024). Understanding this intersection is vital, as English teaching within Islamic contexts requires balancing religious principles with global communication needs (Juliani, 2025).

Hence, this study seeks to bridge these gaps by focusing on a specific case: the English teaching experiences at MA NWDI Lepak, a high-performing Islamic senior high school located in a rural area of East Lombok.

Context of the Study: MA NWDI Lepak and Nahdlatul Wathan Values

MA NWDI Lepak operates under the *Nahdlatul Wathan Diniyah Islamiyah* Foundation, one of the largest Islamic educational organizations in West Nusa Tenggara. The foundation emphasizes the integration of religious values *ikhlas* (sincerity), *disiplin* (discipline), and *pengabdian* (service) into all learning activities (Sahnan, 2024). The school has earned an "A" accreditation and consistently produces outstanding graduates, making it recognized as *the best rural school* in East Lombok.

This unique institutional environment influences English teaching in two ways. First, teachers are expected to align language instruction with moral and spiritual values, ensuring that foreign language education strengthens rather than undermines students' Islamic identity (Atmowardoyo & Sakkir, 2024). Second, the school community's cohesive social structure fosters collective responsibility, allowing teachers to innovate and adapt their pedagogical approaches despite limited infrastructure (Sujarwo et al., 2024). In this setting, English teaching becomes both an academic and moral endeavor, reflecting the *Nahdlatul Wathan* vision of producing globally competent but spiritually grounded students.

Research Problems and Questions

Based on the background and literature review above, the following research problems are formulated:

1. What specific challenges does the English teacher face in teaching English at a high-performing rural Islamic school, MA NWDI Lepak?
2. What strategies does the teacher employ to overcome these challenges and ensure effective English language instruction within the *Nahdlatul Wathan* educational context?

These research questions aim to capture the lived experiences of the English teacher, focusing on practical classroom challenges, pedagogical adaptations, and the integration of religious values into English teaching.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on rural English language education by highlighting how teachers in *rural high-performing Islamic schools* maintain educational excellence despite systemic limitations. It expands the discussion beyond the deficit model to include resilience, innovation, and religious integration in rural ELT contexts (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Sujarwo et al., 2024).

Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers, teacher education programs, and rural educators. They emphasize the importance of context-based professional development, where teacher training incorporates local cultural and religious values alongside modern pedagogical theory. The study also provides a replicable model for other rural schools aiming to balance faith-based education with global language competence.

Ultimately, this research underscores that the success of English language teaching in rural Islamic schools like MA NWDI Lepak is not dependent on material abundance, but on teacher creativity, cultural sensitivity, and the harmony between faith and education.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which aimed to provide a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the challenges faced by an English teacher and the strategies used to overcome them in a high-performing rural school. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative descriptive research is suitable for exploring real-life experiences and social phenomena in their natural settings. The approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe the phenomenon of English teaching in depth, without manipulating the natural context of the classroom (Sugiyono, 2022).

The research focused on the lived experiences of a single English teacher at MA NWDI Lepak, one of the best Islamic senior high schools in rural East Lombok, operating under the *Nahdlatul Wathan Diniyah Islamiyah* Foundation. This design enabled the researcher to investigate the intersection between pedagogical challenges, teacher strategies, and the influence of religious-cultural contexts.

Research Site and Participant Selection

The study was conducted at MA NWDI Lepak, located in Lepak Village, East Sakra District, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara. The school was selected purposively because it represents a unique case of a *high-performing rural school* with "A" accreditation and consistent academic achievement despite limited resources.

The research participant was one English teacher, Mr. Nazaruddin, M.Pd., who met the following inclusion criteria:

- a) A minimum of ten years of teaching experience at MA NWDI Lepak.
- b) Recognized by the school as a senior teacher with consistent performance and leadership in language instruction.
- c) Actively involved in both classroom teaching and extracurricular English programs, such as the English Club.
- d) Willing to participate voluntarily and provide access to classroom observation and interviews.

This purposive selection ensured that the participant possessed sufficient experience and contextual knowledge to provide rich and reliable data (Moleong, 2019). Additional supporting informants included the principal and two other teachers to provide triangulated perspectives on the school's teaching dynamics.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered over a four-month period (June–September 2025) using three main techniques: observation, interview, and documentation based on the principles of triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Sugiyono, 2022).

1. Observation

Non-participant observation was carried out in three separate English classes to capture authentic classroom dynamics. The researcher used an observation sheet containing indicators adapted from Spradley (1980), focusing on:

- a) Teacher's instructional methods and classroom management.
- b) Student participation, motivation, and responses.
- c) Teaching aids, materials, and learning media used.
- d) Obstacles and adaptive actions observed during lessons.

All observations were recorded in detailed field notes and supported by photographs (with consent) to ensure data accuracy.

2. Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher as the main informant, complemented by the school principal and two colleagues. The interview guideline consisted of three major themes:

- a) Challenges in teaching English (students, facilities, environment, curriculum).
- b) Strategies and techniques used to overcome these challenges.
- c) The influence of *Nahdlatul Wathan* values on English teaching.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify ambiguous responses and ensure data consistency.

3. Documentation

Documentation was used to validate data obtained from observations and interviews. Documents collected included:

- a) School profile, accreditation reports, and achievement records.
- b) Teacher lesson plans (RPP), syllabi, and teaching materials.
- c) Photos of teaching activities and classroom settings.

These documents provided contextual depth and served as secondary data to support the interpretation of findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes four cyclical stages:

1. **Data Condensation:**
The researcher organized, simplified, and selected relevant data from transcripts and field notes. Initial codes were generated to represent meaningful units related to challenges and strategies.
2. **Data Display:**
The coded data were presented in narrative and tabular forms to visualize emerging patterns and relationships.
3. **Thematic Coding:**
Using thematic analysis, codes were grouped into broader themes such as "student motivation," "pedagogical adaptation," and "resource limitation." This process helped uncover underlying meanings and relationships across data sources.
4. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:**
Conclusions were drawn inductively, tested

against the data, and refined through iterative analysis. Re-verification was conducted to ensure internal consistency between findings and raw data.

This approach allowed a detailed understanding of the phenomenon while maintaining methodological rigor and transparency.

Data Trustworthiness

To ensure data validity and reliability, the study employed several verification strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

1. **Triangulation:** Cross-verification of data from different sources (teacher, principal, documents) and methods (interview, observation, documentation).
2. **Member Checking:** The transcribed data and emerging findings were reviewed by the main participant to confirm accuracy and authenticity.
3. **Peer Debriefing:** The researcher discussed the coding process and interpretations with academic supervisors to avoid subjective bias.
4. **Audit Trail:** All research procedures, field notes, and coding decisions were documented systematically to maintain transparency and replicability.

These techniques strengthened the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the qualitative findings (Moleong, 2019).

Methodological Limitations

Although the qualitative design provided deep contextual insights, this study acknowledges several methodological limitations. First, it involved only one English teacher as the primary subject, limiting the generalizability of results to other schools. Second, as data collection relied heavily on self-reported information, there is potential for subjective bias in participant responses. Third, time constraints restricted the number of classroom observations, which may not capture all instructional variations. Despite these limitations, the study's credibility was enhanced through rigorous triangulation and verification techniques, ensuring that the findings remain trustworthy and meaningful within the studied context.

Result and Discussion

Context of the School and Students

MA NWDI Lepak is an Islamic senior high school located in a rural area of East Lombok, under the *Nahdlatul Wathan Diniyah Islamiyah* Foundation. Despite being geographically distant from urban centers, it holds an "A" accreditation and is widely acknowledged as one of the best schools in the region. The school emphasizes

three core values *discipline*, *sincerity*, and *service* which are deeply embedded in both academic and non-academic activities (Sahnan, 2024).

The student population consists largely of children from farming families with limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Their average English proficiency is heterogeneous: some students actively join English Club and competitions, while others struggle with basic vocabulary and pronunciation. This diversity creates both a pedagogical challenge and an opportunity for differentiated instruction. The learning facilities are modest no language lab, limited internet access, and only a few printed textbooks. Nonetheless, students display high respect for teachers and enthusiasm for learning when lessons are engaging and linked to real-life contexts.

Within this environment, Mr. Nazaruddin, M.Pd., a senior English teacher with over ten years of experience, has successfully maintained high learning standards and student achievement. His classes consistently demonstrate effective interaction, strong participation, and measurable progress in students' communicative competence.

Identified Challenges in Teaching English

The research identified three key challenges faced by the teacher:

1. **Low Student Motivation:**
Many students viewed English as difficult and irrelevant to their daily lives, as it was not used outside school. This lack of exposure led to passive classroom behavior and reluctance to speak.
2. **Diverse Student Proficiency Levels:**
In a single class, the gap between high and low achievers was substantial, making it difficult to deliver material evenly.
3. **Limited Learning Facilities:**
The absence of adequate teaching media, books, and technology constrained the teacher's ability to employ modern methodologies.

These findings resonate with earlier research by Harmer (2007) and Weran et al. (2025), which identified environmental and infrastructural barriers as key inhibitors of motivation and achievement in rural EFL contexts.

Teacher's Strategies to Overcome Challenges

1. **Enhancing Motivation through Interactive Techniques**

To combat low motivation, the teacher applied brainstorming, elicitation, and contextualization. Each lesson began with a stimulating question or local example, such as discussing village festivals or daily routines in English. This approach activated students' prior knowledge (*schema activation theory*, McVee,

Dunsmore, & Gavelek, 2018), helping them connect new vocabulary to familiar experiences.

Moreover, by encouraging peer collaboration and group competitions, the teacher increased student engagement through social interdependence, aligning with Johnson & Johnson's (2018) *Cooperative Learning Theory*. Over time, students demonstrated greater confidence in expressing ideas and began to associate English with enjoyment rather than fear.

2. **Managing Mixed-Ability Classes through Scaffolding and Differentiation**

Recognizing the diversity in student proficiency, the teacher used scaffolding by breaking complex tasks into smaller stages. Before reading a passage, he pre-taught key vocabulary, followed by guided comprehension questions. This method aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, particularly the concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, where temporary support helps students progress to higher levels of competence.

In addition, differentiated support was provided: weaker students received visual aids and simpler instructions, while advanced students completed extension tasks. This reflects Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014), ensuring that every learner could access the curriculum. The outcomes were visible: students who initially struggled became more responsive and independent over time.

3. **Overcoming Resource Limitations through Creativity and Collaboration**

Faced with limited facilities, the teacher demonstrated remarkable creativity. He replaced missing teaching aids with improvised materials, such as flashcards made from recycled paper and word games written on the board. Occasionally, he used his personal mobile phone to play short audio clips, allowing students to practice listening.

These improvisations exemplify Place-Based Education (PBE) principles (Zhou & Wang, 2025), in which teachers use the local environment as a contextual resource. Furthermore, the school principal supported this by allowing flexible scheduling and encouraging collaboration with other teachers to share materials. This collegial support served as a non-material factor that empowered innovation even under resource constraints (Yahya & Martha, 2025).

Supporting Factors in Implementing Strategies

Several supporting factors enabled the teacher to apply these strategies effectively:

1. **School Leadership and Institutional Support:**
The principal's open leadership style and appreciation for teacher creativity fostered a positive work climate. Teachers were encouraged

to design contextual lessons and engage students in co-curricular activities such as the English Club and debate training.

2. Religious and Cultural Values:

The *Nahdlatul Wathan* ethos of sincerity and service motivated the teacher to teach with patience and dedication. This spiritual dimension strengthened the teacher's intrinsic motivation, aligning with Humanistic Education Theory (Rogers, 1983), which emphasizes empathy and personal growth.

3. Collegial Collaboration:

Regular teacher meetings allowed sharing of methods and classroom experiences. The sense of community built among staff members promoted professional reflection and innovation (Hattie & Yates, 2014).

Together, these factors illustrate that pedagogical effectiveness in rural contexts is not an individual endeavor but a collective institutional effort.

Impact of the Teacher's Strategies on Student Learning Outcomes

Observation and interviews revealed several positive outcomes resulting from the implemented strategies:

1. **Improved Motivation and Participation:** Students began volunteering to answer questions and actively engaged in group discussions. Their attitudes toward English became more positive, consistent with Dörnyei's (2014) concept of motivational strategies in language learning.
2. **Enhanced Speaking and Writing Skills:** Scaffolded instruction and peer collaboration improved students' fluency and accuracy. Their average writing scores, according to teacher records, rose from 72 to 84 over two semesters.
3. **Increased Self-Confidence:** The supportive environment, delayed error correction, and reflective feedback reduced students' anxiety, corresponding to Krashen's (1982) *Affective Filter Hypothesis*.

These outcomes indicate that the applied strategies not only addressed immediate classroom challenges but also contributed to sustained improvement in student learning behavior and achievement.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings confirm that context-sensitive pedagogy can transform limitations into opportunities for innovation. The teacher's combination of *constructivist*, *sociocultural*, and *communicative* approaches reflects an integrated model of rural English teaching. By activating prior knowledge (schema theory), providing scaffolded support (Vygotsky), and promoting meaningful interaction (Communicative Language Teaching), the teacher successfully bridged

theoretical frameworks with practical realities (Swain, 2005; Hattie & Temperley, 2007).

Furthermore, the study underscores the critical role of school leadership and institutional culture in sustaining teacher motivation and creativity. Leadership that recognizes teacher agency rather than imposing rigid top-down supervision enables the emergence of innovative teaching even in resource-limited settings (Juliani, 2025).

From a practical standpoint, the case of MA NWDI Lepak demonstrates that the combination of religious ethics, teacher professionalism, and collaborative culture can serve as a powerful model for other rural schools in Indonesia. The integration of *Nahdlatul Wathan* values with modern ELT theory provides a holistic approach where moral education and communicative competence reinforce one another.

Summary of Key Findings

1. **Challenges:** Low motivation, proficiency disparity, and lack of resources.
2. **Strategies:** Brainstorming, elicitation, scaffolding, group learning, differentiated instruction, and delayed error correction.
3. **Supporting Factors:** Leadership, religious culture, and collegial cooperation.
4. **Outcomes:** Improved motivation, skill development, and confidence.
5. **Implications:** Teacher creativity and institutional support are more decisive for ELT success than material facilities.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges and strategies of an English teacher at MA NWDI Lepak, recognized as *the best rural Islamic senior high school* in East Lombok. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to capture the authentic experiences of the teacher in a real classroom context.

The findings revealed three major challenges: low student motivation, diverse English proficiency levels, and limited learning facilities. To address these issues, the teacher implemented a set of adaptive and student-centered strategies, including brainstorming, elicitation, scaffolding, group learning, differentiated support, and delayed error correction. These strategies were supported by contextual and communicative learning approaches that effectively enhanced students' engagement, confidence, and linguistic performance.

The analysis showed that the success of English language teaching in rural contexts is not determined by material abundance, but by teacher creativity, professional adaptability, and the presence of supportive leadership. The *Nahdlatul Wathan*

educational philosophy rooted in sincerity (*ikhlas*), discipline (*disiplin*), and service (*pengabdian*) further strengthened the teacher's commitment and shaped a moral framework for resilient teaching practice. The school's strong leadership and collegial culture provided institutional reinforcement, enabling innovation and continuous improvement.

This study answers both research questions by demonstrating that:

1. English teachers in high-performing rural schools face interconnected motivational, pedagogical, and infrastructural challenges.
2. Through reflective, theory-driven, and value-based strategies, these challenges can be transformed into opportunities for educational innovation and excellence.

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