Fluency Foundations: Rethinking ESL Education

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English is widely recognized as the language of international communication, spoken by nearly two billion individuals worldwide. Proficiency in English provides access to diverse opportunities, particularly within the global labor market (Mulsadmin, 2021). In the Philippines, however, recent years have seen a gradual decline in English proficiency. The 2022 English Proficiency Index ranked the country 22nd among Southeast Asian nations, reflecting a downward trend from earlier positions: 14th in 2018, 20th in 2019, 27th in 2020, and 18th in 2021 (Banzuelo, 2021). This performance is notably distant from its 13th-place ranking in 2016. Such decline underscores the need for comprehensive government action to strengthen the educational system while safeguarding the welfare of teachers, who remain the frontliners of learning delivery (Equipado & Gilbas, 2021). Teachers are not only viewed as conveyors of knowledge but also as role models who shape values and aspirations, a responsibility that entails considerable professional and personal challenges.

Within the Philippine ESL context, teachers occupy a central role in bridging linguistic gaps, fostering communicative competence, and responding to shifting educational demands. The professional role of

English teachers has evolved significantly with the introduction of innovative pedagogical approaches and the integration of digital and smart learning tools. To remain effective, teachers must adapt to rapid developments in education, science, and technology, while tailoring instruction to increasingly diverse learner needs. Despite this pivotal role, many Filipino teachers experience workload intensification, frequently performing tasks beyond classroom instruction (Domingo, 2020). They often invest personal time and resources to sustain the quality of learning, making significant sacrifices in the process. As Corner (2020) argues, teachers must continually reflect on their pedagogical practices and recalibrate their roles in alignment with the principles of teaching English as a global or international language. Such adaptation, however, does not entail discarding traditional practices altogether but rather balancing them with emerging approaches.

Teacher welfare, in turn, is shaped by broader institutional and contextual conditions. Ece and Kazazoğlu (2021) emphasize that job satisfaction is influenced by multiple factors, including classroom interactions, institutional support, course design, the availability of resources, and demographic conditions. For English teachers in the Philippines, these factors directly affect their capacity to deliver effective ESL instruction. This reality highlights the pressing need for systemic support structures that complement pedagogical innovation, ensuring that educators are adequately equipped and motivated to sustain excellence in English language teaching.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching English as an ESL

Teachers in the Philippines encounter persistent challenges in teaching English, arising from student-related factors, systemic barriers,

and resource constraints. Domingo (2020) identified low student motivation, inadequate teaching materials, unconducive classroom environments, and insufficient administrative support for teacher training and professional development as major obstacles. Similarly, Cahyati and Madya (2018) distinguished between internal factors, such as pedagogy, learner motivation, and national identity, and external factors, including inadequate textbooks, limited learning resources, low teacher proficiency, and large class sizes.

The linguistic environment adds further complexity to English instruction. Teacher Cel (2016) observed that reliance on vernacular speech patterns, coupled with the absence of native-speaking models, has resulted in vernacularized pronunciation, sentence structure, intonation, and vocabulary. Aziz et al. (2019) likewise emphasized that inadequate exposure to English, compounded by poor physical infrastructure and limited instructional materials, constrains effective language learning. Günes (2017) further noted the persistence of structural issues such as insufficient class hours, overcrowded classrooms, and the lack of in-service training opportunities.

Learner-related difficulties also remain significant. Nanda and Azmy (2020) linked poor reading comprehension in EFL contexts to low motivation, limited prior knowledge, and insufficient vocabulary factors that hinder academic achievement, problem-solving skills, and long-term educational outcomes. Abrar et al. (2018) found that younger learners often display shyness, reluctance to speak in English, and inadequate time allocation for language practice. Madalińska-Michalak and Bavli (2018) similarly reported low learner motivation and limited time spent studying English, while Songbatumis (2017) highlighted additional barriers, including poor vocabulary mastery, lack of concentration, boredom, and

difficulties in oral communication.

Compounding these issues are teacher-related constraints. Studies indicate limited training, low proficiency, unfamiliarity with information technology, and inadequate institutional support as recurring challenges. Facility-related constraints, particularly resource shortages and time limitations, also reduce instructional effectiveness. Cheung et al. (2020) argued that addressing diverse learner needs requires the development of technological pedagogical knowledge, which can be strengthened through closer university–school partnerships. This underscores the broader imperative of adapting instructional strategies to contemporary learning environments.

Despite these systemic and learner-related challenges, teachers continue to demonstrate adaptability and innovation in their practice. Castro (2023) reported that teachers employ diverse instructional strategies including films, video clips, chants, songs, rap, role-playing, dramatization, games, and pronunciation drills to enhance language fluency and sustain learner engagement. Domingo (2020) highlighted teachers' resourcefulness in creating instructional materials, designing alternative activities, and striking a balance between technology-based and traditional resources.

Fostering a supportive and motivating classroom climate is also considered essential. Oktavia et al. (2022) emphasized that teacher commitment, intrinsic motivation, and the creation of a positive learning environment can enhance both academic performance and socio-emotional development. Similarly, adopting a positive mindset enables teachers to reframe challenges constructively and maintain professional resilience.

Finally, professional development remains a critical mechanism for strengthening teacher capacity. Ayalew (2022) underscored that targeted training programs not only enhance teachers' understanding of pedagogical

and contextual challenges but also equip them to manage stress, improve psychological well-being, and adopt healthier work practices. Such interventions contribute to sustained teacher effectiveness, improved student outcomes, and greater readiness to navigate the evolving demands of English as a Second Language instruction.

Strategies in Teaching English as an ESL: A Case Study

In many rural areas of the Philippines, the teaching of English continues to pose persistent challenges for educators. Despite advancing through grade levels, a significant number of learners remain unable to read fluently, construct basic sentences, comprehend written texts, or express themselves effectively in English. These enduring difficulties highlight systemic gaps in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and underscore the pressing need for targeted interventions.

The study examined the challenges encountered by elementary teachers in teaching English as an ESL subject. By gathering first-hand accounts from practitioners, the study generated context-specific insights into the barriers faced in classroom instruction. Such empirical evidence is essential for developing appropriate, practical solutions that can enhance teaching effectiveness and address the broader systemic issues that continue to affect English instruction in rural Philippine schools.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological approach. This design enabled the researcher to work closely with participants in order to describe and understand their lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in teaching English. The phenomenological lens allowed the study to capture these experiences as

accurately as possible, grounded in the participants' own narratives.

The study was conducted in the District of Hamtic, under the Schools Division of Antique. The town is linguistically diverse, with three spoken dialects: Hamtikanon (a distinct local dialect), Karay-a (the lingua franca of Antique), and Hiligaynon (the regional dialect). The participants were eight teachers assigned to English classes for Grades III to VI within the district. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym reflective of their characteristics and personal background.

Participants were selected according to the following criteria: (a) graduate of either Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) or Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd), (b) licensed professional teacher, (c) currently teaching English in elementary grades within the Hamtic District, (d) with at least three years of teaching experience in Grades III to VI, (e) either English major or non-major, (f) attended mass training on the K to 12 curriculum, and (g) willingness to share teaching experiences. Additional factors such as age, gender, position, years of teaching, and grade level handled were also considered to ensure diversity of perspectives.

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed interview guide based on the study's statement of the problem. Open-ended questions were employed to elicit rich and detailed responses. The instrument was divided into three sections: (a) Background Information – including name, age, gender, position, years in service, grade level handled, and educational attainment; (b) Preliminaries, focusing on personal details related to the teaching profession; and (c) Core Questions, consisting of twelve open-ended items addressing the three main statements of the problem, specifically lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies in teaching English.

Prior to data collection, permission was secured from the Schools

Division Superintendent, the Principal-in-Charge of the District, and the respective School Heads. Informed consent was obtained from participants through a signed form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and the extent of their involvement. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at schedules convenient to the participants. Each session lasted between 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the depth of responses. Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in documentation, and transcripts were subsequently prepared for analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. The researcher carefully reviewed the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and salient issues. These were then clustered and categorized into themes that encapsulated the participants' shared experiences. The process allowed the study to generate nuanced insights into the lived realities of elementary teachers as they navigated the complexities of teaching English in the District of Hamtic.

Findings

This section presents the positive experiences of elementary teachers in teaching English, emphasizing the dimensions of professional fulfillment, personal growth, and emotional reward derived from their instructional role. These themes underscore not only the intrinsic satisfaction teachers experience but also the deeper professional insights gained through practice, reflecting the value of teaching English as both a pedagogical endeavor and a source of personal meaning.

Theme 1: Comfort and enjoyment in teaching

Teachers reported a sense of comfort and enjoyment in teaching English to elementary learners. Observing their students acquire new ideas

and develop essential language skills provided a deep sense of professional fulfillment. Although some participants acknowledged that they were not initially passionate about the teaching profession, their engagement with English instruction enriched their own vocabulary and broadened their perspectives through continuous classroom interactions.

Theme 2: Realization of roles

Participants emphasized their critical role in developing learners' foundational skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They acknowledged that these competencies serve as the cornerstone for students' future academic achievement, positioning their work as essential to long-term educational success.

Theme 3: Developing a sense of fulfillment

Findings revealed that teaching English provided teachers with a strong sense of fulfillment. They reported positive emotions when learners were able to grasp lessons, even when English was not their primary field of expertise. Many emphasized that they, too, learned alongside their students, continuously expanding their own knowledge and skills. Witnessing learners' progress, increased confidence, and character development offered teachers a profound sense of professional and personal reward.

This section presents the major challenges encountered by teachers in teaching English. The themes highlight difficulties related to classroom dynamics, learner characteristics, and limited resources, all of which influence teaching effectiveness and overall instructional outcomes.

Theme 1: Learners' behavior

Teachers identified disruptive classroom behavior as a significant barrier to effective English instruction. Instances where students were inattentive, disengaged, or unprepared to listen created considerable challenges in delivering lessons and maintaining instructional flow.

Theme 2: Diversity of learners

Managing a class with diverse learning abilities emerged as a demanding responsibility for teachers. Varying levels of comprehension among students required differentiated instruction and additional effort to ensure that all learners could engage meaningfully with the lesson objectives.

Theme 3: Presence of non-readers

The presence of non-readers posed a significant challenge, as it slowed the pace of lesson delivery. Teachers were often required to conduct remedial reading sessions and repeat lessons to secure learners' understanding before moving on to new content.

Theme 4: Attachment to mother tongue

Many learners preferred to communicate in their local language during class, which limited their ability to express ideas in English. This language preference often led to reluctance, shyness, and minimal participation, with students resorting to short or one-word responses.

Theme 5: Lack of learning resources and references

A shortage of textbooks and reference materials further constrained the teaching of English. The lack of readily available instructional resources

compelled teachers to devote additional time to sourcing materials, thereby reducing opportunities for learners to engage in independent reading and deeper exploration of the subject matter.

Theme 6: Learners' poor comprehension skills

Limited reading comprehension skills among students significantly hindered lesson understanding. Factors contributing to this challenge included low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, hesitation in participation, and a restricted vocabulary. In the absence of adequate comprehension, teachers faced difficulties in achieving the intended learning outcomes and ensuring meaningful engagement with the lesson content.

This section explores the coping strategies employed by teachers to navigate challenges in teaching English. The identified themes emphasize personal, interpersonal, and professional approaches, illustrating how educators adapt, collaborate, and innovate to overcome obstacles and maintain instructional effectiveness.

Theme 1: Maintaining calmness and a positive mindset

Teachers highlighted the importance of maintaining optimism as a means to address classroom challenges constructively. Cultivating a positive mindset allowed them to plan more effectively, respond adaptively to difficulties, and foster a supportive and engaging learning environment for their students.

Theme 2: Developing motivation and inspiration

Participants' motivation was sustained by a strong desire to inspire students to succeed academically and in life. This sense of purpose

reinforced their commitment to teaching, enabling them to persist in their roles despite the challenges they encountered.

Theme 3: Practicing flexibility and resourcefulness

Flexibility enabled teachers to adapt to unexpected situations in the classroom, while resourcefulness allowed them to identify alternative methods to convey concepts effectively. Many participants incorporated engaging activities to reduce stress and foster a positive classroom atmosphere, enhancing both teaching effectiveness and student learning.

Theme 4: Seeking advice from colleagues

Collaboration with colleagues emerged as an effective strategy for stress relief and problem-solving. By sharing experiences and insights, teachers cultivated a supportive workplace culture that facilitated the management of professional challenges.

Theme 5: Engaging in professional development

Teachers actively participated in training sessions and seminars to enhance their instructional methods and better address the needs of diverse learners. Engagement in professional development enabled them to stay informed of emerging teaching trends, acquire new pedagogical skills, and strengthen their capacity to deliver high-quality English education.

The findings indicate that teaching English in elementary schools provides teachers with a profound sense of fulfillment and professional satisfaction, particularly when witnessing learners develop language skills and confidence. Simultaneously, teachers encounter numerous challenges that impede the effective delivery of quality English instruction. Addressing these difficulties requires that educators engage in targeted professional

training and cultivate a diverse repertoire of teaching strategies, techniques, and methods tailored to the varied needs of their learners.

Recommendation

This study recommends that teachers implement remedial or enrichment reading programs to support non-readers in improving their English reading and comprehension skills. Participation in these programs can enhance learners' reading proficiency while fostering a positive attitude toward learning English. Additionally, students are encouraged to engage in independent reading during their free time to further expand vocabulary and strengthen comprehension.

At the institutional level, the Department of Education may conduct systematic English assessments to provide a data-driven foundation for technical assistance and targeted support to schools. Furthermore, the Department could organize training sessions or seminars focused on effective classroom strategies for teaching English, delivered through District or Division Offices, to equip teachers with practical skills and pedagogical innovations.

Parental engagement is also crucial. Parents are encouraged to actively monitor their children's learning progress at home, participate in quarterly classroom meetings with advisers to discuss academic performance, and engage in school activities that promote the holistic development of their children. Such collaborative efforts among teachers, administrators, and parents can create a supportive educational ecosystem that enhances English learning outcomes and fosters sustained student achievement.

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