

ENGLISH LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN RURAL EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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Abstract

The importance of English language skills in educational achievement and economic opportunity has grown, and rural students suffer from disproportionate challenges in acquiring communicative competence. This extensive literature review compiles data regarding the English language barriers that exist in rural educational settings, as well as the barriers faced by teachers and students. This review, which is based on systematic analysis and synthesis of peer-reviewed research published from 2017 to 2024, highlights 7 major categories of barriers that students encounter: i) limited exposure to English, ii) weak foundational skills, iii) mother tongue interference, iv) low confidence and speaking anxiety, v) socio-economic constraints, vi) inadequate learning resources, and vii) examination-oriented pedagogy. At the same time, rural teachers face significant challenges such as lack of professional development, limited English proficiency, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, curriculum-assessment misalignment, low motivation and institutional support, and lack of digital connectivity. These barriers work in a systemic way, and institutional, socio-economic, pedagogical and technological aspects are reinforcing cycles of educational disadvantage. Through the review, the rural English language problems can be found to be not individual failures, but structural inequalities in the way resources are distributed, teacher development, and educational infrastructure. There is evidence that the following strategies (teacher professional development, communicative and activity-based approaches, culturally-relevant content, technology integration, and policy-level support) have the potential to mitigate these barriers. Implementation is not uniform, however. The review highlights important research gaps, especially on comparative studies of rural and urban effects, longitudinal intervention effects, and context-specific solutions for low resource settings. Promoting access to language learning opportunities in rural education requires systemic approaches at a variety of levels to ensure equitable access and to minimize the educational inequality that exacerbates socio-economic inequality.

Keywords: English Language Barriers, Rural Education; Educational Inequality, Language Learning, Teacher Professional Development, Speaking Anxiety, Sociocultural Context

1. Introduction

1.1 The Strategic Importance of English Language Proficiency

English has become the language of the world of trade, science, technology and diplomacy (May, 2019). English proficiency is an essential tool for academic success, career progression and social integration in a complex and global world. In developing countries and low-income settings, the ability to speak English may mean the difference between higher education opportunities, jobs in the knowledge economy, and engaging in international discussions (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). This is especially critical in educational systems where English is a foreign language (EFL) or an additional language (AAL), where individuals are expected to acquire communicative competence, as well as their local education.

1.2 The Urban-Rural Divide in Language Learning

Although the importance of English cannot be overstated, there are considerable differences between the educational environments of urban and rural areas. Pupils in urban areas generally have more opportunities to speak English and better access to English-speaking settings, improved school facilities, higher teacher density and enhanced access to school resources such as books, media and technology. In contrast, learners in rural areas may live in linguistically homogeneous communities in which students use English only at school, have access to school facilities and resources that are limited, and learn from teachers who may not be proficient in English or have received adequate teacher training (Zamir & Wang, 2023). These structural disparities lead to significant disparities in learning outcomes, and rural students have been found to consistently perform less well than their urban counterparts in receptive and productive English skills (Ofosu-Asare, 2024).

1.3 Why Rural Students Face Greater Challenges

There is particular difficulty in the acquisition of the English language in rural areas due to multiple reinforcing factors. Limited access to books, digital devices, and additional educational resources outside of school to assist language learning is affected by poverty (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Internet access is poor in rural areas, and it is difficult for rural students to use online resources or other communication networks with the world (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Rural agricultural economies have limited use for English in practical matters, which decreases intrinsic motivation and opportunities for the use of English (Lamb, 2017). Parents' literacy levels are lower in rural areas, reducing the potential for home-based language support (Zamir & Wang, 2023). Moreover, qualified teachers are disproportionately distributed to urban centers with the result of qualified English teachers being in short supply in rural schools (Sutcher et al., 2019).

1.4 Why Rural Teachers Face Distinct Barriers

There are significant differences between the contexts in which rural English teachers work and those of urban English teachers. Many rural teachers face the challenges of their own lack of fluency in the English language, as well as a lack of knowledge of contemporary communicative teaching methods in the face of insufficient pre-service training and limited opportunities for ongoing professional development (AbdulRab, 2023). In rural schools, large classes are common which hinders individualized feedback and meaningful oral practice (Agyapong et al., 2022). Insufficient teaching materials lead to using old textbooks and memorization, which is not conducive to communicative language teaching. High workload, low remuneration and lack of institutional support are factors that demotivate and lead to teachers' burnout (Agyapong et al., 2022). The digital divide leaves rural teachers disconnected from professional learning communities and new developments in teaching and learning (Akram et al., 2022).

1.5 Importance of Examining This Topic

The lack of a common language in rural education continues the education gap and restricts social mobility for the rural community. However, the fact that English is used as a gatekeeper to further education and career opportunities exacerbates other trends of disadvantage for rural learners (Flores & García, 2017). It is vital to grasp these challenges in order to create equitable education policies and interventions. Furthermore, a study of students' and teachers' perceptions shows that the lack of English in rural areas is not a problem with the students themselves, but a systemic problem (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022).

1.6 Research Problem and Research Questions

The research problem this review deals with is the lack of understanding of the English language barriers in rural education, which have serious implications for educational equity and social development. The review is structured in the following four research questions:

RQ1: What are the significant English language challenges for students in rural educational environments?

RQ2: What are the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English in rural schools?

RQ3: What are the factors that limit English language use in the rural education system from an institutional, socio-economic, pedagogical and technological perspective?

RQ4: What evidence-based strategies and policy measures can help to decrease English language barriers in rural education?

2. Review Methodology

2.1 Type of Review

The review uses a narrative review method that combines qualitative and quantitative studies to gain a deeper understanding of English language barriers in rural education settings. The narrative approach enables findings to be integrated across a range of geographic location, levels of education, and research methods, enabling them to be analysed thematically and theoretically, but not quantitatively meta-analysed (Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

2.2 Databases and Search Strategy

She systematically searched literature in five scientific databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and ScienceDirect. Specialized education databases and journal repositories were also used in additional searches to provide comprehensive coverage. The following keywords were used: English language barriers, rural education, rural students, English language teaching, teacher challenges, speaking anxiety, second language learning, mother tongue interference, educational inequality, rural schools, teacher professional development, and digital divide in education. Searches were performed in an iterative manner with some terms added from the citation reference and some new terms added from the themes that emerged.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria were: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and research reports; (2) studies that directly address EL in rural or resource-constrained educational settings; (3) studies that examine both the learning challenges of students and the obstacles facing teachers; (4) studies that were primarily published between 2017-2024, with foundational theoretical work included regardless of publication date; and (5) studies conducted in a variety of geographic contexts to ensure global representativeness.

Exclusion criteria: (1) Studies that only addressed the urban context without the inclusion of a rural context; (2) studies that focused on adult acquisition of language other than the language of instruction (English); (3) studies that studied other languages but were not transferable to English; (4) opinion pieces with no empirical evidence; (5) studies lacking in methodological rigor or unclear reporting.

2.4 Thematic Analysis and Synthesis

The titles and abstracts from the initial screening identified around 150 sources that might be relevant. Full text review identified 80+ sources of interest for inclusion. Structured coding adopted an approach to categorize findings within the following scheme: (1) student barriers; (2) teacher challenges; (3) contextual/institutional factors; (4) intervention strategies; (5) research gaps. Recurring patterns, contrasts and theoretical frameworks across studies were revealed by thematic analysis. Themes were synthesized for the purpose of developing an overall picture of the systemic effects of the English language barriers in rural education.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Background

3.1 Second Language Acquisition Theory

Theories of contemporary second language acquisition (SLA) provide the necessary frameworks for understanding English language development in rural contexts. The Krashen input hypothesis states that language learning takes place when the learner is exposed to

comprehensible input in low-anxiety settings (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). This is in conflict with the limited exposure to English that is found in rural classrooms – where students receive little to no meaningful input (mostly in books and maybe in the teacher's speech). Moreover, the traditional grammar-translation approach used by the rural schools is not conducive to communicative practice, which is not in line with the implicit learning processes advocated by the SLA studies (Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

3.2 Sociocultural Theory of Language Learning

In terms of the theoretical framework, the Socio-cultural approaches, which are based on Vygotsky's theory, focus on language learning as a result of social interaction in cultural context (Phyak, 2021). There are barriers to language development for rural learners because they have limited interactions in English with their peers, few opportunities to communicate in the English language in real contexts, and little connection between English language in the classroom and in the real world. The theory also emphasizes that teachers are cultural mediators who help students learn language, and that poorly trained rural teachers are less equipped to provide language learning support in the form of scaffolded interaction and cultural mediation that is important for meaningful language learning.

3.3 Identity and Investment in Language Learning

This is because Norton's theory on investment in language learning shows that the motivation of language learners to participate in language learning activities is influenced by the possibility of obtaining social capital and social identity through language learning activities (Darvin & Norton, 2021). Less instrumental utility for English in rural contexts may lead to less investment and involvement. Teacher-student power imbalance, especially when the teacher has a lack of confidence in English, continues to affect the investment and motivation of learners.

3.4 Sociological Perspectives on Educational Inequality

The educational inequality literature shows that differences in school resources, teacher quality, curricular content, and other factors systematically benefit urban students, while disadvantage rural students (Flores & García, 2017). In addition to individual characteristics, English language barriers are a structural inequality that is established in the allocation of resources, implementation of policy, and institutional structures that unevenly distribute educational advantages (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022).

4. English Language Barriers Faced by Rural Students

4.1 Limited Exposure to English

Authentic opportunities for learning English are greatly limited for rural students compared to their urban counterparts (Zamir & Wang, 2023). English is almost entirely used in the classroom setting in linguistically homogeneous rural communities. Local languages dominate the wider linguistic environment, such as the shopfront signs, public notices, media and casual conversation. The studies conducted in Pakistan and China have revealed that students in rural areas seldom get exposure to English outside the classroom settings which results in dramatic differences in English input as compared to urban students who have English input in their surroundings (Zamir & Wang, 2023). Further, in rural areas, there are fewer opportunities to access English-language media, such as access to English-language films, TV shows, books, newspapers and podcasts for additional input. Cumulative effect of limited environmental exposure has a significant impact on rural students' language acquisition paths.

4.2 Weak Foundational Skills

Despite years of formal education, many rural students have low levels of basic English skills when they start secondary school. Typical weaknesses in writing involve lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, faulty understanding of basic grammatical structures and weak reading comprehension (Chand, 2021). These gaps are not addressed throughout school and continue

to build up to unstoppable barriers at a higher level of education. A study conducted with undergraduate learners in Nepal revealed the fact that even after studying English for several years, a large number of students were unable to grasp the basics of speaking and listening skills (Chand, 2021). Lower primary school, with poorly trained teachers, who do not set an adequate foundation, and the assessment systems which focus on written tests rather than communicative competence, can be a source of these deficits as students move through the school without acquiring functional skills.

4.3 Mother Tongue Interference

The influence of students' first languages on their development of English language skills is strong especially when the instruction is not explicit in terms of the contrastive linguistic features (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Rural students often switch pronunciation, grammar and discourse features from their L1 into the L2, yielding non-native-like production. The main types of interference that are expressed clearly are: pronunciation of sounds that are not part of the students' L1, the formation of complex sentences with L1 grammatical structures, and the lack of English stress and intonation patterns (Boustani, 2019). Some mother-tongue influence is normal but the lack of adequate teacher training frequently means that interference is not corrected and hence non-native patterns are consolidated. Moreover, examination systems focusing on mother-tongue translation can inadvertently foster translation-based thinking, instead of English comprehension.

4.4 Lack of Confidence and Speaking Anxiety

Speaking anxiety is a ubiquitous barrier that impedes a significant number of rural English learners (Chand, 2021). Several factors are involved: fear of making grammatical errors, fear of peer judgment, lack of experience of oral production, and self-beliefs of low ability. Psychological issues such as nervousness, low self-esteem, and anxiety of making mistakes are cited as one of the most common causes of speaking difficulties (Shen & Chiu, 2019). Anxiety is often reinforced in the classroom, and pedagogies are teacher-centered and there are little opportunities for low-risk oral practice in large classes. In addition, if English teachers themselves do not have confidence in their own English or have problems with English, then students will internalize negative models and doubt their ability to reach the goal of English (Daftari & Taval, 2017). The anxiety-confidence loop results in many rural students being silently disengaged from lessons even though they are at school.

4.5 Socio-Economic Barriers

Rural students' access to language learning opportunities is directly affected by poverty (Zamir & Wang, 2023). Families who don't have the money for school supplies can't afford the supplemental books to help them advance in reading. Private tuition in English, offered to wealthier urban families, is not available because of lack of family resources. Many students drop out of school in rural areas due to transportation issues and household responsibilities, causing interruptions in schooling. In addition, there is a negative correlation between poverty and parent literacy in English, which means there is no support for English in the home. Pupils in low income families can suffer from poor nutrition and sleep, which can affect their ability to learn and think. Poor mental health as a result of poverty takes time away from education. Poverty intersects with gender in numerous ways, and is especially limiting to rural girls' educational opportunities.

4.6 Limited Access to Learning Resources

Approaches to the problem of resource scarcity in the context of rural language learning are constrained by the scarcity of resources (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). A large number of rural schools have no English books and materials, and the library is not functional. In some cases, libraries are not available, and if they are, the library books tend to be old and deteriorated, and are not supplemented with reading materials. Access to digital resources is still rather restricted, with

many rural schools not equipping themselves with computers, Internet access and language learning software (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Students are not able to use online learning platforms for English, online dictionaries, translation software, or pronunciation software, which are common among urban students. This resource shortage also applies to authentic resources: English newspapers, magazines, DVDs of authentic films, or recordings of native speaker speech are not available to rural classrooms. Lack of language lab and interactive multimedia materials limit the students to traditional teaching using the grammar rules and grammar text.

4.7 Examination-Oriented Learning

In many developing countries, especially those in rural areas, it is acknowledged that there is a de-emphasis of communicative language development in educational systems in favor of standardized exams that have a negative impact on communicative language development (Chand, 2021). In high stakes tests, grammar knowledge and reading comprehension are usually tested in a decontextualized manner, with the aim of rewarding the memorization of grammatical rules instead of real communication practice. Examination-oriented teaching systems default to grammar-translation approaches, in which grammar rules are explained and students learn paradigms to be translated and practice with fill-in-the-blank questions. This teaching method does not enable pupils to acquire speaking and listening skills or to become communicative. As Lamb (2017) explains, teachers in resource-poor rural environments are already under-resourced in terms of training in communicative approaches, and when examinations offer clear accountability pressures, teachers resort to grammar-translation strategies.

5. English Language Teaching Challenges Faced by Rural Teachers

5.1 Lack of Professional Training

The lack of adequate pre-service and in-service teacher training is a basic obstacle to the quality teaching of English in rural schools (AbdulRab, 2023). The majority of rural teachers in England were trained in secondary schools which had little focus on language learning and where the teachers' training was not necessarily geared towards the communicative approach. Opportunities for professional development are limited, with urban teachers having access to workshops, professional networks, and online courses, but rural teachers experiencing difficulties with continuing education (Akram et al., 2022). Studies across various contexts have revealed that rural teachers often lack knowledge about how to implement communicative language teaching, task-based teaching, and technology-based teaching. Teachers who do not engage in systematic professional development continue to pass on the traditional grammar-translation approach they received as students, thus perpetuating intergenerational reproduction of ineffective pedagogy.

5.2 Limited English Proficiency among Teachers

Interestingly, however, some rural English teachers are themselves not very fluent in the target language (Daftari & Tavit, 2017). Those who were trained in exam-centered systems could be very well-versed in grammar, but not be very conversant in speech and could have little experience using the language in real speech. Rural teachers generally do not have much exposure to extended English immersion or to native speakers. Therefore, many rural teachers have problems with pronunciation, spontaneous speech, listening to authentic English and understanding English speaking contexts. In the absence of confidence in the teacher's English language proficiency, he or she teaches the students to be insecure about the language and to doubt the teacher's authority, and to fear the situations in which his or her own insecurity will be revealed. Studies have shown that students' productive skills are negatively affected by teachers' insecurities in their own language skills (Daftari & Tavit, 2017).

5.3 Overcrowded Classrooms

Effective instruction in English is seriously limited by rural schools' large class sizes (Agyapong et al., 2022). In rural classes, it is often not possible to have meaningful oral interaction, correct pronunciation or individual attention in a class of 50-80+ students. It is impossible for teachers to walk around and give feedback to all students, or know when certain students need feedback. The classroom is transformed into a lecturer's domain which substitutes dialogue for the student. Time allocated for speaking practice becomes impractical, even if teachers find time, there are very few individual speaking opportunities per student. A consistent finding in classroom research is that large classes significantly affect students' target language speech production (Shen & Chiu, 2019). Also, the lack of space contributes to discipline issues, which are in the way of language instruction. Teachers are weary of dealing with 70+ students, and have little energy for pedagogical innovation.

5.4 Lack of Teaching Materials

The problem of material scarcity is indeed a significant challenge in the teaching of English in rural areas (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Often, in rural schools, there is only one book used and that is an old or culturally inappropriate text. Teachers do not have access to additional materials, listening texts, authentic reading texts, visual materials or communicative activities to enhance the teaching process. Material creation is limited due to the cost of photocopying and lack of access to reproduction technology. Teachers seldom use teacher resource books, lesson plan suggestions or instruction advice after initial teacher preparation. No technology-based materials, which includes videos, podcasts, interactive games, and multimedia materials. As a result, teaching is centered around textbooks, focusing on written exercises. This material deficiency is especially detrimental to listening ability training, since most of the rural classrooms have no working audio equipment, or speakers that can play real English speech.

5.5 Curriculum and Assessment Misalignment

Many rural education systems experience an issue of disconnect between curricular goals and classroom practice (Zamir & Wang, 2023). While communicative competence is frequently stated as the main objectives of curricula, assessment instruments focus on grammar and reading and rely on written tests. This imbalance leads to perverse incentives: Teachers invest in instructional time in the grammar and reading skills because of the examination focus, while the curriculum focuses on communication (Huber & Helm, 2020). In addition, curricula often provide levels of competence that are not suitable for the starting level of students, resulting in target mismatch and the expectation of student performance that may exceed what they can achieve. In systems with an emphasis on exams, teachers are under pressure to "teach to the test," and may ignore curriculum goals that involve other teaching methods and assessment techniques.

5.6 Low Motivation and Institutional Support

The teachers of rural English often suffer from low motivation, which is a problem caused by various factors (Agyapong et al., 2022). Teachers in rural areas may earn wages that fall short of those in urban areas and the cost of living in rural areas may be similar or even higher. Financial pressures may result. Opportunities for furthering career development are scarce: few rural schools have specialist teachers of English, nor do they have advancement pathways. A lack of social interaction with peers and the opportunity for intellectual stimulation that can lead to dissatisfaction with employment. Most importantly, in many rural schools, administrators may not understand language pedagogy, offer limited resources, provide limited supervision, and not recognize teacher contributions (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Low compensation, weak institutional support, limited advancement, and isolation result in teacher demotivation and higher teacher turnover in rural schools than in urban schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

5.7 Digital Divide and Technology Access

Rural educators' access to contemporary resources and professional learning is severely limited by the digital divide (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Numerous rural schools do not have a reliable electricity supply, computer systems or internet. Teachers have no access to online teaching resources, online professional communities, and technology-enhanced pedagogy (Akram et al., 2022). The lack of technological access forces rural teachers to rely on traditional teaching tools and techniques, which prevents them from using any kind of multimedia, interactive classroom or internet-based learning materials that are now common in language instruction. In addition, teachers' own lack of digital literacy (due to limited access to technology) makes it difficult for them to learn the skills needed to integrate technology into their classes when resources are made available.

6. Institutional and Contextual Factors

6.1 The Rural-Urban Educational Gap

There are systemic inequities in the resources available to schools in the rural and urban areas, which have a cascading effect on the school's English language learner (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Generally, urban schools are more likely to receive higher levels of government funding, to have more well-qualified teachers, to have better infrastructure, and to have more highly educated parents. This structural inequality is not unintended, but rather a policy choice that has been made that prioritizes urban development (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022). Moreover, economic polarization in urban areas leads to positive feedback: highly skilled teachers move to the cities for better jobs, and the poorest students stay in rural schools with fewer resources.

6.2 Teacher Shortage and Maldistribution

Qualified English teachers are scarce in rural areas (Sutcher et al., 2019). Competitive salaries and the lack of job prospects, isolation, and poor working conditions deter qualified teachers from taking rural jobs. English teachers in rural schools are often not qualified or interested and were assigned to teach English because of other teacher shortages (Margot & Kettler, 2019). This inequitable distribution of teaching forces focuses experienced and qualified teachers in urban areas while in rural areas less-qualified teachers are providing instruction.

6.3 Poor School Infrastructure

The physical infrastructure problems directly affect language learning (Bozkurt et al., 2020). A large number of rural schools don't have classrooms and/or electricity, or water and sanitation. Language laboratories, computer rooms and libraries (which are infrastructure needed to support contemporary language pedagogy) are missing. Uncomfortable classrooms, with inadequate space, light and ventilation, provide unsuitable learning conditions, and affect students' ability to focus on studying language.

6.4 Policy Implementation Gaps

The policy-practice gap is found throughout rural education (Bozkurt et al., 2020). There are many lofty goals in national education policies, such as communicative language teaching, the use of technology in education, and lifelong learning for teachers. But the implementation in poor rural areas is not always successful. Policies don't consider contextual constraints; recommendations that work in an urban school don't work in a rural school without electricity or Internet. Additionally, policy monitoring tends to be directed at urban schools, and implementation in rural schools is typically not well monitored, leaving policies only partially implemented or even only partially enforced.

6.5 Limited Community Awareness and Parental Support

In rural areas, the importance of English is underestimated and is seen as irrelevant to the livelihoods of farmers and the future of rural communities (Zamir & Wang, 2023). This limited awareness lessens the pressure from parents on schools to enhance the quality of English teaching and decreases the amount of language support in the home environment. In many rural

contexts, parents' literacy in English is low, and they are unable to support their children's learning and to model English use. In certain contexts, cultural factors can devalue English in the context of colonialism or Western dominance, which can further limit community engagement with English education.

6.6 Intersecting Inequalities: Gender and Socio-Economic Status

Language barriers in English intersect with gender and socio-economic inequalities (Flores & García, 2017). Rural girls may also be subject to other challenges for English language development, such as the cultural norms that limit girls' participation and attendance in school-based activities. Poor families often invest more in a boy's education than in a girl's, failing to provide her with tutoring or other educational assistance. The overlapping inequalities of disadvantage are even greater, as the rural, low-income girls encounter the greatest challenges with English proficiency (Flores & García, 2017).

6.7 Lack of Multilingual Resources and Translanguaging Support

In most rural schools, English is a language system that is isolated from pupils' multilingual experiences (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Curricula are usually focused on teaching in English, even though there is much evidence that the use of local languages as scaffolding can be very helpful in developing English. Teachers have not received training on translanguaging approaches that make use of students' language resources. As a result, instruction does not create connections between local languages and English, leaving students to make their own linguistic leaps.

7. Discussion: Systemic Nature of Rural English Language Barriers

7.1 English Language Barriers as Systemic Rather Than Individual Problems

Student and teacher barriers to learning English showed that the issue of language deficit in the rural context is a systemic problem and not merely an individual one (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022). The fact that students in rural areas are not less able to develop English is not a reason to exclude them from mainstream education, but rather that they face systematically different conditions limiting English development. Likewise, rural teachers are not incompetent, they work in circumstances that preclude good teaching. The traditional deficit perspective of rural language problems, which focuses on the lack of ability of students and/or poor teaching by teachers, masks structural issues and diverts attention from systemic change to individual change (Ellis et al., 2017).

7.2 Reinforcing Cycles of Disadvantage

Student and teacher barriers are interactive, and can lead to reinforcing cycles that are difficult to break. Limited English proficiency and training teachers teach students with minimal exposure to English; weak student abilities demoralize teachers and limit pedagogical ambitions, while weakening the students' abilities and confidence. A lack of resources makes it impossible for communicative approaches to be implemented that would encourage the students, and a lack of students' motivation is an argument in favor of traditional teacher-centred teaching. The cumulative effect of these cycles over time is that rural students are increasingly behind their urban counterparts each school year.

7.3 Consequences for Academic Performance, Higher Education Access, and Employment

Rural students' wider educational achievement is significantly limited by their English language barriers. English is used as a medium of instruction in many secondary and tertiary programmes, especially in science, technology and professional programmes. Lack of English proficiency undermines achievement in content subjects which are taught in English. Without good English, access to higher education is a challenge, and competitive entrance exams frequently have English requirements, as do instructions in universities. English is increasingly used as a medium of communication in the knowledge industry, and in the world, English

language proficiency among rural graduates is a significant constraint on their employment. As a result, rural people's economic and social disadvantages continue due to their lack of English language skills (Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

7.4 Intersections with Broader Educational Inequalities

English language barriers in rural areas are part of larger issue of educational inequity. Systematically, rural schools receive less funding, less qualified teachers, poorer infrastructure, and less parent education than do urban schools (Flores & García, 2017). One of the many forms of systemic educational disadvantage in all subjects is English language barriers. English, however, is of special significance in view of its global importance; deficits in English knowledge uniquely limit access of rural learners to global education and economic opportunities.

7.5 The Central Role of Teachers

Although various factors are responsible for these language barriers in rural areas, teachers are also key players in any possible solutions (AbdulRab, 2023). Communicative approaches do not need sophisticated technology to be used by teachers in low-resource settings. Teachers can help students interact with one another, draw on prior local experiences and their personal backgrounds to facilitate communication, and create a psychologically safe environment to lower students' speaking anxiety. However, unlocking teachers' potential demands significant commitment to their professional development, working conditions and institutional support. The current scenario of training under-trained, supporting under-supported, motivating under-motivated teachers to teach good-quality English in a classroom which is overcrowded and under-resourced, is a recipe for failure. In contrast, investing in teachers through training, support and conditions is a high leveraging intervention.

8. Strategies to Overcome English Language Barriers

8.1 Teacher Professional Development and Capacity Building

There is robust evidence that professionally developed, well-designed PD results in enhanced teacher effectiveness and student outcomes (AbdulRab, 2023). Effective professional development should: (1) focus on the principles of communicative language teaching and interactive pedagogies; (2) develop teachers' English language proficiency through continuous and conversational development, including conversation clubs and immersive experiences; (3) provide practical classroom techniques that are easily transferable to resource-poor environments; (4) use ongoing teacher support rather than single workshops; (5) establish teacher professional learning communities to connect rural teachers with peers; and (6) incorporate digital literacy to prepare teachers for technology integration (Wess et al., 2023). Training through peer mentoring, teaching demonstrations and collaborative planning are examples of research-based practices that develop capacity and respect to contextual constraints.

8.2 Activity-Based and Communicative Teaching Approaches

The shift from grammar-translation to communicative approaches has had a significant impact on the improvement of learning outcomes (Lamb, 2017). Activities that are effective in communicating include: group discussions on topics that are personally relevant, role plays and simulations, storytelling and narrative activities, pair work with structured communication tasks, debates and discussions, reading circles with peer comprehension checking, and speaking clubs for practicing fluency in psychologically safe environments. These activities involve students, encourage confidence, give students the opportunity to become good communicators, and may not need much in the way of materials. Students who are taught using the communicative method learn to speak much better, are more confident, and more motivated than students who are taught using the grammar-translation method, as revealed by research (Shen & Chiu, 2019).

8.3 Utilizing Local Context and Student Experience

The contextualization of English learning with students' lived experiences, local knowledge and community contexts significantly enhances students' relevance and engagement (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Instead of using textbook dialogues about foreign situations, successful teaching is based on students' experiences: agriculture, local businesses, local issues, culture, etc. This localization enables authentic communication purposes, motivates students by making things relevant, and utilizes students' prior knowledge as a basis for learning language. There is a need for teacher training in materials adaptation and context-sensitive pedagogy, while the implementation requires little resources.

8.4 Technology Integration Appropriate to Resource Constraints

In many schools located in rural areas, there is no much technology but in some schools, strategic use of technology can improve learning (Akram et al., 2022). Low-cost solutions involve: the use of mobile phones (which are becoming more common, even in rural areas), for language learning applications; the use of offline educational videos and audio recordings, without the need for internet connectivity; the use of radio lessons, which can be broadcast to multiple schools at the same time; the use of low-bandwidth platforms for accessing educational content; and the use of community multimedia screening in school environments. Teachers need to be trained in technology-enhanced pedagogy and problem solving to be able to adjust techniques to the resources that are available. Furthermore, policies that focus on enhancing digital access in rural schools are key investments in infrastructure.

8.5 Building Reading Culture and Vocabulary Development

The reading ability is directly linked to the overall language development (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). They have implemented: School libraries that have readers with graded books and age-appropriate English books, sustained silent reading with teacher guidance, reading circles with student discussion over a text, a reading competition that provides positive motivation, and vocabulary journals for students. The literature shows that students who have a wide range of reading experience acquire better vocabulary, comprehension and writing skills (Ofosu-Asare, 2024).

8.6 Community and Parental Engagement

The contribution of community awareness and parent involvement is very significant in the process of learning English in rural areas (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). This can be achieved through: public campaigns on the importance of learning English for school and work, parent sessions that inform parents of how they can help support English learning, community celebrations of English language successes and collaboration with community leaders to promote the value of English. Although parents may have limited English proficiency, parents can support their children's learning, minimize the amount of time spent using the mother-tongue when studying English, and engage in school activities that will support English learning.

8.7 Policy-Level Structural Reforms

Policy-level supports needed for sustainable improvement are: targeted recruitment and retention of qualified teachers in rural schools through incentives and career paths; increased funding for rural schools, such as language laboratories and libraries; curriculum reform with objectives in line with realistic assessment approaches that focus on communicative development; and teacher accountability systems where communicative competence is given greater importance than examination results. Furthermore, policy should focus on infrastructure, with emphasis on connectivity in rural schools and infrastructure for pedagogical flexibility to allow for adaptation to local situations rather than prescription.

9. Research Gaps and Future Directions

9.1 Limited Empirical Research from Rural Contexts

There is a significant lack of empirical research that specifically focuses on English language learning in rural schools (Zamir & Wang, 2023). The focus of most studies is on the urban or university settings, with the exception of rural education being under-researched. There are few studies that follow a group of rural students for several years and provide information about language development over time and the effects of intervention. There is still a gap in qualitative research regarding the experiences, motivations and perspectives of rural learners and teachers. There is a crying need for solid empirical studies in real, non-laboratory, rural school environments, in order to generate findings that are applicable to the field.

9.2 Insufficient Comparative Rural-Urban Research

Rural and urban conditions for English learning are limitedly compared, with some differences in exposure, resources, quality of instruction and outcomes noted (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Comparative studies would help to determine which rural deficiencies are due to natural factors and which to structural factors, which can be corrected. Second, comparative studies between different rural settings (geographical, climatic, and economic) would show the commonalities and differences among rural barriers, and identify those that are universal and those that are context-specific.

9.3 Limited Teacher-Focused Research

Despite a number of studies that explore teacher professional development in rural areas, there is limited research that investigates rural teachers' experience, knowledge, beliefs, and agency (AbdulRab, 2023). Is there an understanding of how teachers in the rural context make pedagogical decisions, how they make sense of their roles, and how they experience teaching that would inform more culturally responsive professional learning? Moreover, there is limited research that explores the role of effective teacher leadership and school level factors that promote teacher motivation.

9.4 Intervention Studies Lacking Long-Term Follow-Up

Most intervention research considers the short-term impact of professional development or pedagogical innovation, and follow-up assessment is done immediately after the intervention. There is limited evidence of the sustainability and long-term effects of interventions (Wess et al., 2023). Are teachers able to sustain reformed practices after completion of training? Are students' learning gains maintained? Longitudinal research designs are needed to answer such questions.

9.5 Limited Research on Digital Solutions in Rural Contexts

Although technology has the potential to close the gap between rural and urban areas, few studies explore which technology-based interventions are successful in low resource rural settings (Akram et al., 2022). Much digital learning research takes place in well-resourced environments, and the conditions for translating to offline environments with limited bandwidth are not well understood. Mobile learning, offline delivery of content and community-based multimedia in real rural environments should be investigated.

9.6 Insufficient Attention to Intersectionality

There is very little research on the intersection of English language barriers and gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, linguistic background and disability status (Flores & García, 2017). To ensure interventions benefit all rural students, especially those with compound disadvantage, it is important to understand these intersections.

9.7 Knowledge Gaps Regarding Context-Specific Solutions

Although there is a lot of variation across different contexts in rural areas in terms of resources available, language ecology, economic structures, and cultural factors, most research applies across all of these contexts. Most research applies across various rural contexts, although there

is significant contextual variation in resources available, language ecology, economic structures and cultural factors (Zamir & Wang, 2023). Context-specific research that looks at what strategies are effective in specific rural contexts would inform more effective interventions. Furthermore, there is limited evidence on how to adapt evidence-based urban interventions to rural settings.

10. Implications

10.1 Implications for Teachers

Rural teachers of English need to be recognised as professionals for whom support is needed, not as problem generators. Implications are: (1) significant investment in pre-service and ongoing professional learning focused on communicative pedagogy, cultural competence, and technological literacy; (2) establishment of professional learning communities of isolated rural teachers; (3) explicit training in adapting instruction to meet the demands of limited resources and maintain pedagogical quality; (4) the development of practical teacher resources in the form of lesson plans, ideas for activities, strategies for adapting instruction, and other resources that are specifically developed for the rural context; (5) psychological support to deal with stress, isolation, and burnout that rural teachers often experience; and (6) explicit permission and encouragement to diverge from standardized curricula and materials to make instruction contextual.

10.2 Implications for School Administrators

School leaders have a critical impact on school conditions that support ELL. Implications are as follows: (1) allocating resources and emphasizing English in the curriculum; (2) recruiting and retaining qualified English teachers with career incentives; (3) nurturing school environments that allow teachers to collaborate, access professional development opportunities and experiment with pedagogical practices; (4) monitoring English proficiency and classroom quality in schools; (5) involving community and parents in the support of English learning; and (6) advocating with district and regional leaders for resources and policy support.

10.3 Implications for Policymakers

The lack of English proficiency in rural areas needs to be tackled at the policy level. Implications involve: (1) targeted funding, which would involve providing more per-student resources to rural schools to buffer against resource differences; (2) policies that ensure qualified teachers remain in rural schools through incentives, bonding, and/or career pathways; (3) curriculum reform, in which objectives match assessments that focus on communicative competence, particularly in rural contexts; (4) infrastructure investments that prioritize rural school facilities, electricity, internet connectivity; (5) monitoring and evaluation systems that focus attention on rural contexts; (6) pedagogical flexibility, which would allow teachers to tailor instruction to the context; and (7) language policy, which would include addressing the role of English relative to local languages and translanguaging approaches.

10.4 Implications for Curriculum Designers

The curriculum and curriculum design have a deep impact on the education in rural areas. Implications are: (1) the design of curricula that are realistic for rural settings, with teacher-friendly directions for adaptation to resource constraints; (2) the inclusion of rural contexts, characters and experiences in the curriculum materials with increasing relevance; (3) additional resources to support activity-based and communicative instruction; (4) materials that support the use of English and the local language; (5) curriculum objectives aligned with assessment approaches that promote communicative development; and (6) extensive teacher guidance for implementing the curriculum in diverse settings.

10.5 Implications for Researchers

Researchers should take up the tasks of expanding the empirical knowledge of rural English language learning. Implications are: (1) longitudinal empirical research in authentic rural

settings that includes the perspectives of students and teachers; (2) rigorous intervention research with long term follow-up that documents long-term sustainability; (3) comparative research between rural and urban contexts that specifically addresses rural barriers; (4) examination of context-specific factors that affect the learning of English across diverse rural contexts; (5) examination of intersectionality (how multiple dimensions of disadvantage interact); (6) participatory research with rural teachers and learners focusing on their knowledge and agency; and (7) dissemination of findings to practitioner audiences in accessible formats that support evidence-based practice.

11. Conclusion

The role of English language barriers in rural education is one of the greatest unmet needs and challenges in global education. This review has reported on the inequities that rural students and teachers face, which are cascading and have implications for learning outcomes, higher education participation and economic opportunity. The lack of exposure to English language, low foundational skills, low confidence, socio-economic factors, and examination pedagogy all interact with one another to limit students' language development in a rural context. At the same time, rural teachers face the challenges of inadequate professional development, poor English proficiency, overcrowding, lack of materials, and lack of support from their institutions, all of which severely restrict their ability to provide quality instruction.

Most importantly, these barriers are not single failures, but systemic failures. Structural inequalities in resources, teachers and policies are the causes of the rural English language deficiency, not the learners' or teachers' inability. Minimal investment in rural schools, focus on urban schools, least-skilled teachers to most at-risk students, and standardized accountability systems that are divorced from local contexts will ensure educational disadvantage for rural students.

But the review has also highlighted evidence-based practices with potential for enhancing the learning of English in rural areas. The combined effort of teacher professional development, communicative pedagogies, context-sensitive instruction, appropriate technology integration, and policy-level reforms can help minimize English language barriers. The key is that it needs to be coordinated, and it needs to be happening at multiple levels of the system—meaning that teachers need investment and support; schools need resources and autonomy; communities need engagement; and systems need reform.

Teaching English in rural areas is an investment in educational equity and human development. Quality English teaching is not a privilege for rural learners because English teaching in itself is better, but because in today's globalised world, English competence is real educational currency that impacts on access to knowledge, higher education and economic opportunity. Ignoring the rural English barriers will continue to trap students and farmers in the vicious circle of educational and economic exclusion, depriving rural people of their voice and wasting their human resources in the global society.

The way forward requires courage to admit systemic inequities, the commitment to distributing resources equitably, a commitment to a high level of investment in rural educators, and policies that allow pedagogical flexibility in response to local contexts. Most fundamentally, it demands that rural learners, like their urban counterparts, deserve quality education and genuine opportunities to develop the language skills that enable them to access higher education, meaningful employment, and fuller participation in global society.

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