



Exploring the Consequences of the Absence of English Teachers on Students' English Learning in Rural Schools: A Case Study at Senior High School

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the lack of competent English teachers on student learning in rural schools, focusing on a case study of Nurul Hasan Plus High School. The shortage of English teachers in the 3T (remote, frontier, and outermost) areas has been shown to hamper academic development and reduce student motivation. Through an exploratory qualitative case study approach involving interviews, observations, and documentation, data were collected from 1 principal, 1 substitute teachers, and 4 students. The findings show that schools must rely on substitute teachers from other fields, resulting in inconsistent learning and declining quality. Students feel bored, lack enthusiasm, and experience difficulties in mastering basic skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. Efforts such as self-study using digital media or simple assignments cannot replace the role of professional teachers, while institutional solutions such as the placement of non-specialist teachers are only temporary. This condition widens the educational gap between rural and urban areas. This condition widens the educational gap between rural and urban areas. The study highlights how teacher shortages directly disrupt English learning processes in rural settings and underscores the need for systemic measures to ensure equitable access to qualified English teachers.

Keywords: *teacher shortage; English education; rural school; case study; learning; qualitative research, educational equality.*

Introduction

In rural education, the presence of qualified English teachers is crucial to support effective learning. English is not only a compulsory subject in the Indonesian curriculum but also a gateway to global knowledge, higher education, and future employment opportunities. However, many rural schools still face teacher shortages, both in terms of quantity and competence (Musthafa, 2010). SMA Plus Nurul Hasan is one such school where the shortage of English teachers has been a long-term challenge.

This shortage is more than just an administrative issue; it creates systemic barriers to students' academic development. Without competent teachers, students miss out on structured learning, consistent support, and meaningful motivation to develop their language skills. As Harmer (2007) and Richards and Farrell (2005) explain, teachers shape the learning environment as facilitators, guides, and motivators who help students develop. At SMA Plus Nurul Hasan, the lack of qualified English teachers often forces students to learn independently or rely on substitute teachers from unrelated fields, resulting in gaps across all language skills. Studies such as those by Sari and Lestari (2019) have shown that teacher absence reduces motivation and lowers achievement, particularly in foreign language learning.

Although the Indonesian government has launched a teacher placement program in remote, frontier, and outermost (3T) areas, its implementation remains inconsistent and has not fully met local needs. Broader research has highlighted similar issues. UNESCO (2015) identified the unequal distribution of teachers as a major obstacle to educational equity. Harmer (2007) and Richards and Farrell (2005) emphasized the need for effective classroom management and continuous professional development. Musthafa (2010) noted that rural schools face limited infrastructure, weak access to technology, and a shortage of trained teachers. Overall, these studies indicate that teacher shortages undermine the quality of instruction and student motivation.

However, many of these studies take a macro or policy perspective. They offer broad descriptions rather than detailed accounts of how teacher absence is experienced in specific school settings. Even more local studies, such as those by Sari and Lestari (2019), rely primarily on descriptive quantitative methods and do not explore students' lived experiences. As a result, the psychosocial consequences of teacher absence, including its impact on motivation, engagement, and coping strategies, remain underexplored.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on the consequences of the absence of qualified English teachers at SMA Plus Nurul Hasan, a rural school that has long struggled with this issue. The research seeks to answer three key questions: (1) What are the consequences of the absence of English teachers on students' learning processes and outcomes in rural schools? (2) How do schools and students cope with the absence of English teachers? and (3) What alternative strategies are used to support English learning in such conditions? Based on these questions, the

objectives of this study are: (1) to identify and describe the consequences of teacher absence on student learning outcomes, (2) to uncover how schools and students adapt to the absence of qualified English teachers, and (3) to explore alternative strategies to sustain English learning in rural contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploratory case study design, which offers a detailed picture of the lived experiences of students, teachers, and administrators, and highlights the multidimensional impacts of teacher absence at academic, motivational, and structural levels. This study contributes both to theoretical discussions on educational inequality and to practical recommendations for addressing teacher shortages in rural Indonesia.

Method

This research uses an exploratory case study design, an approach that allows researchers to explore and understand phenomena in depth within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). This study focuses on SMA Plus Nurul Hasan, a small rural school located in a remote village with approximately 230 students, limited facilities, and restricted access to digital resource. The school has experienced a prolonged absence of English teachers. This exploratory design was chosen because the issue under study has rarely been specifically researched, particularly in the local context and in English language education in rural schools. The purpose of this is not to test theories or draw generalizations, but to provide a comprehensive picture of the realities, processes, meanings, and adaptation strategies employed by students, teachers, and the school. By emphasizing the social context and the lived experiences of participants, this exploratory case study is expected to uncover hidden dimensions of the teacher absence issue in a more authentic and in-depth manner.

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, a deliberate selection of subjects based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. A total of 6 participants were involved: 4 SMA Plus Nurul Hasan students directly affected by the absence of English teachers, one substitute teachers or non-specialist teaching staff who took over English instruction informally, and one principal who understood the administrative and policy aspects related to the situation. All participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the context under study and their willingness to participate actively and openly in interviews and other data collection activities. This approach enabled the researchers to obtain rich and relevant data from multiple perspectives.

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher herself, as is common in qualitative approaches (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). To facilitate systematic and comprehensive data collection, several supporting instruments were used, including a semi-structured interview guide, non-participatory observation sheets, and documentation. The interview guide allowed the researcher to explore information in depth and provide flexibility in exploring participant responses. The observation sheets were used to record detailed English learning activities, student

interactions, and classroom situations. Meanwhile, documentation included teacher attendance, student grades, lesson schedules, and internal school policies, which could strengthen the primary data. The combination of these three instruments served to triangulate the data, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the research data.

Data collection in this study was conducted through several systematic stages from August to September 2025. The first stage was preparation, in which the researcher conducted a literature review, developed the instrument, and obtained permission from the school. The second stage was field data collection, which included interviews with students, substitute teachers, and the principal to explore their experiences and perspectives, observations of the English learning process in classrooms without a permanent teacher, and the collection of supporting documents from the school. A total of six observation sessions were conducted, each lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Next, the interview data was transcribed verbatim and analyzed along with observational and documentation data. Data saturation was reached in the tenth interview, when no new information or patterns emerged. All of these processes were conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, including obtaining informed consent and maintaining participant confidentiality. These procedures aimed to obtain valid, in-depth data that aligns with the study's exploratory focus.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques based on the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of six main stages. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by rereading transcripts and field notes. Second, the researcher coded data relevant to the research focus. Third, these codes were grouped into initial themes. Fourth, the themes were revised and reviewed to ensure they were appropriate and representative of the overall data. Fifth, the researcher provided a name and definition for each final theme. Sixth, the analysis results were compiled into a descriptive narrative that explained the research findings in detail and meaningfully, accompanied by direct quotes from participants to strengthen arguments and enhance the validity of the data. In addition to triangulation, credibility was strengthened through member checking and peer debriefing.

The researcher, an English education student with experience in rural teaching programs, possesses insight into the school context while maintaining reflexivity to reduce bias in analysis. Interviews were reordered and later transcribed word for word according to ethical standards to guarantee accurate and reliable data.

Results

Teacher Availability

According to interviews, the availability of English teachers at SMA Plus Nurul Hasan is still very limited. The school has experienced a significant shortage in recent years, mainly due to the fact that very few teachers in the Singajaya district have qualifications in English as teachers. Currently, since 2024, the situation has been

“quite stable”, but the school still does not have a permanent English teacher. The headmaster stated:

“The availability of English is quite good, especially from 2024 to now. In previous years, it was probably due to a shortage of English teachers, especially in the Singajaya district. Thankfully, it is now stable.” (Headmaster)

This suggests that the teacher shortage has been ongoing for several years. Despite some recent improvements, the school still relies on teachers without an English education background. When asked about the status of the English teachers, the principal explained:

"There are actually no permanent teachers with English as their main language or genuine English graduates yet. But there are temporary teachers here who are attached to the MTs (Islamic high schools). The one who is currently teaching English here happens to be a temporary Indonesian teacher." (Headmaster)

This shows that English subjects are handled by teachers who are actually from the Indonesian language department, not English, which directly affects the quality of teaching that students receive.

Institutional Response

To address the teacher shortage, the school has made various efforts, such as posting job advertisements to attract English teacher applicants. However, the response has been minimal. The principal admitted that it is very difficult to find teachers with an English background in the Singajaya area:

“It's really difficult, because in Singajaya district, I don't know anyone who specializes in English teachers... Until now, it's really hard to find English teachers, perhaps because of the limited human resources in this district.” (Headmaster)

As a solution, the school is maximizing the use of existing teachers, even those from other majors, to teach English. The principal stated:

“To address this English shortage... I'm maximizing the use of existing teachers, especially those with language qualifications, for example, Indonesian... they are directly appointed here.” (Headmaster)

This shows that even though institutional responses are implemented, they are only temporary and cannot replace the role of professional English teachers.

Impact Perceived by Students

The absence of a qualified English teacher significantly impacts student learning. When a teacher is absent, the learning process becomes ineffective, and students fail to understand the material. A substitute teacher explained:

"The impact is quite chaotic. So, when there's no teacher, or the teacher is absent, it's really difficult... students don't understand the material, and other teachers don't understand it either because they don't have a basic command of English." (Teacher)
From the students' perspective (Grade XI, ages 17-18), they admitted to feeling bored and unmotivated when English lessons aren't taught regularly. Out of 4 interviewed students, 3 stated:

"A little happy, but bored." (S1, Grade XI)

"Bored too. Sometimes I enjoy it, but mostly it's boring because we don't practice enough" (S2, Grade XI)

"Boring. It feels like we're repeating the same things without new activities" (S3, Grade XI)

This shows that the absence of an English teacher reduces student interest and creates a monotonous learning environment.

Teaching Strategies and Coping Methods

The substitute teacher explained that she usually gives simple assignments, such as reading, to fill gaps in learning that should be more structured.

"To fill gaps, I usually give a little reading assignment so the students can read English vocabulary well." (Teacher)

Meanwhile, students try to compensate by studying independently using online resources. For example:

"I usually learn to translate English sentences from the internet, from the Instagram app." (S1, Grade XI)

"I study the material in school and review it online, from YouTube." (S2, Grade XI)

"I learn from YouTube and TikTok, usually studying the material in school and learning to translate sentences." (S3, Grade XI)

This shows that even though students try to find alternative learning options, their effectiveness remains limited without guidance from a competent teacher.

Consequences and Recommendations

In terms of learning outcomes, the lack of qualified teachers results in suboptimal student achievement. Although some students show improvement in speaking and translation skills, overall progress remains limited. Both the principal and students emphasized the need for government intervention to address this issue. The headmaster stated:

"I think what the government should do is distribute English teachers to remote areas... students will be motivated to continue learning English, and English

seminars should also be held.” (Headmaster)

Students also made suggestions:

“I think there should be a dedicated English teacher so that students have broader knowledge and enjoy the learning process.” (S1, Grade XI)

“I think there should be more time for English learning... if it's short, it's difficult to understand.” (S2, Grade XI)

“I think there should be more time and a dedicated English teacher to make learning English more enjoyable and consistent.” (S3, Grade XI)

The responses emphasized that institutional and government support are equally important in addressing the shortage of English teachers in rural schools. The following are findings from observation in the form of interviews with the principal, substitute teachers and students.

Theme	Subtheme	Supporting Evidence / Citations
Teacher Availability	Availability of permanent teachers	“There are actually no permanent teachers with English as their main language... The one who is currently teaching English... is a temporary Indonesian teacher.” (Headmaster)
	Teacher shortage in 3T areas	“It's really difficult... perhaps because of the limited human resources in this district.” (Headmaster)
Institutional Response	Assignment of non-specialist teachers	“I'm maximizing the use of existing teachers, especially those with language qualifications, for example, Indonesian... they are directly appointed here.” (Headmaster)
	Teacher recruitment efforts	“Posted job advertisements to attract English teacher applicants, but response has been minimal.” (Observation)
Impact on Students	Decreased motivation and interest	“A little happy, but bored.” (S1); “Bored too. Sometimes I enjoy it, but mostly it's boring because we don't practice enough” (S2); “Boring. It feels like we're repeating the same things without new activities” (S3)
	Difficulty understanding the material	“Students don't understand the material, and other teachers don't understand it either because they don't have a basic command of English.” (Teacher)
Teaching Strategies & Coping	Simple assignment by	“To fill gaps, I usually give a little reading assignment so the students

	substitute teacher	can read English vocabulary well.” (Teacher)
	Student independent learning	“I usually learn to translate English sentences from the internet, from the Instagram app.” (S1, Class X); “I learn from YouTube and TikTok...” (S3)
Consequences & Recommendations	Suboptimal learning outcomes	Observasi dan wawancara menunjukkan peningkatan minimal dalam keterampilan berbicara dan penerjemahan, tetapi secara keseluruhan kemajuan terbatas.
	Government & school support suggestions	“Distribute English teachers to remote areas... English seminars should also be held.” (Headmaster); “There should be a dedicated English teacher...” (S1)

Discussion

Teacher Availability and Institutional Response

These findings clearly indicate that SMA Plus Nurul Hasan faces serious challenges regarding the availability of qualified English teachers. For years, the school has relied on substitute teachers whose academic backgrounds are in Indonesian rather than English. This mirrors patterns observed in other developing countries, where rural schools often struggle to attract and retain specialist teachers (UNESCO, 2015; Mulkeen, 2010). Although the principal described the current situation as “quite stable,” this stability refers more to administrative continuity than to the quality of instruction. The tension between perceived stability and the ongoing shortage of qualified teachers underscores the systemic constraints facing rural schools.

Darling-Hammond (2000) emphasized that qualified teachers strongly predict student achievement, and the findings of this study support this view. School strategies to fill vacancies with non-specialists demonstrate administrative resilience but serve as temporary solutions, rather than sustainable ones. Similar patterns have been documented in rural India and the Philippines, where temporary placements failed to produce long-term improvements in student learning. These similarities highlight the broader structural nature of teacher shortages in rural areas.

Cultural factors specific to rural Indonesia also play a role. Limited opportunities for professional growth, low teacher salaries, and social expectations that drive young professionals to seek employment in cities contribute to recruitment challenges. These contextual conditions shape schools' limited capacity to attract trained English teachers, making the problem not only institutional but also cultural.

Impact on Students

The absence of a qualified English teacher impacts students both academically and emotionally. Interviews indicate that students often feel bored, confused, and unmotivated when a teacher is absent. Harmer (2007) noted that teacher presence plays a crucial role in maintaining motivation, and these findings support this claim. Clotfelter et al. (2009) also found that teacher absence reduces student achievement, reflected in students' self-reports of impaired comprehension and lower performance in speaking, reading, and writing.

These findings also revealed an unexpected dimension: despite the lack of guidance, students demonstrated agency and resilience. They turned to YouTube lessons, TikTok explanations, and translation apps to support their learning. This reflects Zimmerman's (2002) concept of self-regulated learning and suggests that students can develop adaptive strategies in the absence of a qualified teacher. However, persistent skill gaps suggest that self-regulated learning cannot compensate for the absence of structured, expert-led instruction.

This duality between resilience and struggle is a key contribution of this study. This illustrates that students in rural areas have motivation and adaptive capacity, but their efforts require support from professional teachers to produce meaningful improvements.

Teaching Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

The findings indicate that substitute teachers attempt to compensate for the lack of structured lessons by assigning students simple reading or vocabulary assignments. While these strategies ensure that class time is not wasted, they do not provide the depth or interactivity that constitutes good English language instruction. Ingersoll (2001) noted that substitute teachers often rely on adaptive strategies, but such approaches are usually limited and cannot fully replace the role of subject specialists.

Digital platforms can complement rural student learning, but they should not be considered a substitute for professional teachers. Instead, technology should be integrated into classrooms alongside qualified teachers to maximize its impact. In this study, student's use of online content demonstrates their agency and adaptive capacity, which could be leveraged through structured blended learning programs.

Student Perceptions and Learning Experiences

The findings indicate that students recognize the importance of English teachers to their learning. Their responses emphasized that English is a compulsory subject and essential for their future career opportunities. This reflects Ryan and Deci's (2000) motivation theory, particularly the concept of intrinsic motivation, where learners are driven by their own goals and values. Despite facing challenges, students demonstrated motivation to continue learning English, a positive sign of resilience.

However, the lack of professional guidance undermined students' intrinsic motivation. Hanushek (2011) argued that teacher availability directly impacted academic achievement, as evidenced by students' weak speaking, writing, and reading skills. Although students were motivated, their progress remained limited, highlighting the teacher's indispensable role in developing skills and confidence in language learning.

Student accounts of boredom and confusion also illustrate how the affective classroom environment is influenced by the teacher's presence. Without consistent and quality teaching, motivation risks decreasing over time, which can result in students viewing English as a difficult and uninteresting subject.

Consequences of Teacher Shortage Recommendations

Research findings indicate that the shortage of qualified English teachers at SMA Plus Nurul Hasan significantly impacts students' academic achievement and motivation. Inconsistent instruction makes it difficult for them to develop basic speaking, reading, and writing skills, while boredom and confusion reduce their engagement and long-term interest in learning English. The school's reliance on non-specialist teachers leads to fragmented teaching quality, and students' reliance on digital self-learning provides only temporary support as it cannot replace structured, curriculum-based learning. Nonetheless, students demonstrate strong motivation by actively seeking alternative learning resources, a form of resilience that could be strengthened through more systematic support in the future.

Limitation and Recommendations

This study has several limitations, including the small sample size and focus on a single rural school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Reliance on self-reported data also introduces potential bias. Nonetheless, these limitations highlight the need for broader comparative studies across rural areas to deepen our understanding of how teacher shortages impact English language learning.

Recommendations voiced by teachers and students emphasize the need for systemic interventions. The principal highlighted the importance of government support through the deployment of English teachers to rural areas, while students suggested longer English class hours and extracurricular programs. This aligns with UNESCO's (2015) recommendation that institutional and policy interventions are needed to address teacher shortages in rural schools.

Therefore, these findings suggest that solutions must be implemented at multiple levels:

1. Government level – teacher redistribution, financial incentives for rural placements, scholarship-to-service schemes, and continuous professional development are essential and ultimately more cost-effective than addressing long-term low achievement

2. School level – structured extracurricular programs, blended learning modules, peer learning groups, and stronger monitoring of substitute teachers can help maintain instructional stability.
3. Community level – collaboration with parents, local organizations, and university volunteers can expand opportunities for English exposure through clubs, workshops, and digital literacy initiatives.

For these efforts to be sustainable, long-term funding, consistent monitoring, and active collaboration between the government, schools, and communities are essential. Improvements such as ongoing teacher training, reliable internet access, and school-based language programs must be maintained despite staffing changes to ensure that students in rural areas continue to have equitable access to quality English education.

Conclusion

This discussion shows that the shortage of qualified English teachers at SMA Plus Nurul Hasan impacts students academically, emotionally, and motivationally. Although students and teachers have developed coping mechanisms, these measures cannot replace structured instruction from trained professionals. Addressing this shortage requires coordinated institutional and policy interventions to ensure equitable access to quality English language education in rural Indonesia.

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