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Resource Constraints and Professional Challenges: Insights from English Teachers in Rural Schools of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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ABSTRACT:

English language teachers in rural areas often face complex challenges that impede effective teaching and learning. This study investigates the experiences of English teachers in rural schools of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, focusing on resource constraints, professional development gaps, and socio-cultural factors influencing English language teaching. Using a qualitative design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 rural English teachers (8 female, 7 male) to capture their perspectives. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed chronic shortages of teaching materials and technology, low student motivation linked to limited English exposure, inconsistent parental support due to socio-economic pressures, and insufficient teacher training and institutional support. These challenges are interrelated and worsen educational inequities between rural and urban settings. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated agency and resilience in adapting to their context. The findings highlight an urgent need for policy interventions, including improved resource allocation, targeted professional development, and community engagement initiatives, to support rural English teachers. This study amplifies teacher voices from an under-researched context and contributes to broader debates on rural ELT, teacher agency, and resource equity in language education.

Keywords: Rural education, English language teaching, teacher challenges, resource constraints, teacher agency

1 INTRODUCTION

There are serious educational issues facing rural communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Schools in remote villages often operate with minimal resources and poor infrastructure, and student outcomes lag significantly behind urban counterparts. According to recent regional statistics, nearly one-third of rural adults in Kurdistan have not progressed beyond primary education, reflecting long-standing disparities [1]. These inequalities are particularly evident in English language education. Rural English teachers frequently work in deteriorated classrooms without adequate textbooks, materials, or access to technology. Many students arrive with weak foundational knowledge of English and little exposure to the language outside school. In such contexts, teaching English as a foreign language becomes an uphill battle that involves not only pedagogical effort but also navigation of socio-economic and cultural barriers [2; 3].

The challenges encountered by rural educators are well documented. Poverty and geographic isolation undermine the quality of schooling in many developing regions [4]. A lack of qualified teachers, high teacher turnover, and multi-grade teaching assignments are common in rural areas, as seen in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and South America [5; 6; 7]. These schools often suffer from insufficient government funding and limited community support, resulting in chronic shortages of teaching aids and unsuitable learning environments. These conditions contribute to lower student achievement and pose unique difficulties for foreign language instruction. English teachers in rural settings must cope with limited instructional resources while trying to motivate students who may question the relevance of English in their daily lives. Cultural and linguistic isolation further complicate the task, as students rarely encounter English beyond the classroom and therefore struggle to see its practical value [8].

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Within the Kurdistan Region, there has been little empirical research on rural English teaching, despite clear indicators of underperformance. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the first-hand perspectives of rural English language teachers. It focuses on identifying the challenges they face, how these challenges affect their teaching, and what support or coping strategies are in place. By spotlighting teachers' voices, the study seeks to understand not only the problems but also the agency and resilience these educators demonstrate in such constrained circumstances. Two research questions guide the study; What are the main challenges faced by English teachers in rural Kurdistan schools? How do these challenges affect their instructional practices and their students' learning? Addressing these questions will help inform solutions to improve equity of English education. The study also contributes to broader discussions on teacher agency in low-resource environments and the urgent need for a more equitable distribution of educational resources. In the following sections, we review relevant literature on rural ELT challenges, describe our methodology, present key findings, and discuss implications for policy and practice in Kurdistan and similar contexts.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural schools worldwide share common structural disadvantages that impact language learning. Remote locations often mean fewer resources, larger teacher workloads, and difficulty attracting trained staff [9]. A lack of infrastructure, such as reliable electricity, internet access, and libraries, creates an environment that is not conducive to teaching English, which increasingly relies on multimedia and up-to-date materials. Classrooms in rural areas have been reported to be in poor condition, posing challenges for both teachers and learners [10]. Such conditions were observed in rural South African schools, where most lacked basic services like water or proper sanitation, which severely obstructed effective teaching. These infrastructural deficits are frequently coupled with large class sizes or multi-grade classes, further complicating the implementation of communicative or student-centred language teaching methods. Rural English teachers often must adapt by prioritizing basic language skills and using any available local resources to create learning opportunities [11].

A dominant theme in the literature is the shortage of teaching materials and instructional aids in rural settings. Rural teachers frequently report not having enough textbooks, visual aids, or technology to support English instruction [12]. For example, in rural Indonesia, insufficient textbooks and limited access to audio-visual equipment were found to significantly impede English lessons. Teachers there had to rely on rote methods due to a lack of engaging materials [13]. A systematic review of rural English teaching noted that inadequate facilities prevent teachers from using modern teaching tools, leading to less effective instruction [14]. In Malaysia, rural educators identified the lack of internet access as a major issue, as it restricted their ability to show English videos or access online content that could enrich lessons. The absence of technology and up-to-date materials contributes to a widening gap between rural and urban students in language exposure [15]. A recent study in Mongolia's remote schools likewise found that limited teaching resources and outdated materials were among the top challenges cited by English teachers. These resource constraints not only affect day-to-day teaching but also negatively impact teacher motivation and innovation, as educators feel they cannot implement best practices without basic tools [16].

Another significant challenge is the lack of professional development opportunities for rural educators. Rural teachers often participate in fewer training sessions on contemporary language teaching methodologies and encounter limited access to professional workshops or advanced certification programs [17]. In Pakistan, rural English teachers frequently remain isolated from mentorship networks, constraining their exposure to innovative pedagogical strategies [18]. Many rural schools rely on underqualified or out-of-field teachers to cover English classes, resulting in deficiencies in subject-matter expertise and instructional confidence [19]. For example, in Mexico, [20] observed that teachers compelled to teach English despite lacking proficiency faced considerable challenges in implementing effective language pedagogy. Continuous professional development (CPD) remains critical for sustaining instructional quality.

[21] emphasizes that bringing accessible training programs to rural educators is essential, as ongoing mentorship and skills enhancement improve teacher efficacy in challenging environments. When training is provided, it can significantly impact teacher quality; for example, a professional development initiative in a rural U.S. district helped teachers adopt more inclusive English learner pedagogies, which in turn improved student engagement.

Rural students' attitudes and motivation toward learning English are often cited as a challenge for teachers. Because rural communities tend to use local languages in daily life, students have little exposure to English outside the classroom. This lack of real-world practice can lead to low confidence and a perception that English is irrelevant to their lives. Studies in Malaysia found that many rural students recognize English is important but do not feel an immediate need for it, resulting in ambivalent or negative attitudes toward learning the language. [22] reported that rural Malaysian high school students often had low motivation in English classes, attributing this to lessons not matching their proficiency and interests, as well as frustration from past negative learning experiences.

Research in Colombia's rural schools described low enthusiasm for English, with students seeing it as a difficult subject disconnected from their context [6]. Some studies suggest that when rural students are made aware of English's significance, they show positive interest. [23] observed that rural Malaysian learners generally acknowledged the

importance of English for their future, even if they lacked opportunities to use it. These mixed findings indicate that rural learners' motivation can be nurtured by relevant and engaging instruction. Yet the prevailing issue is that without additional support, rural students tend to fall behind. Low English proficiency and limited vocabulary are frequently reported in rural areas. Teachers also note that many rural students come from homes where education is not prioritized or supported, which can manifest as poor study habits and a defeatist mindset toward language learning.

Parental support exerts a substantial influence on learners' educational achievement, but rural schools often report minimal guardian engagement due to household economic pressures. [24] argued that persistent poverty in South African rural communities constrains parents' capacity to participate in schooling, as families focus on immediate survival over educational involvement. In rural Nepal, [25] found that limited parental valuation of English, perceived as irrelevant to agrarian livelihoods, diminished encouragement for children's language study. [26] documented that poverty in rural Bangladesh prevented families from affording supplementary materials or tutoring, leading to lower English performance and increased instructional burdens on teachers. This financial strain also compels children to engage in labour or household tasks, undermining attendance and focus. Kurdish rural educators observe that many parents lack resources and time for homework monitoring and that students often study without adequate space or lighting. [27] contended that community-based engagement initiatives can foster trust and underscore the value of education, thereby enhancing parental involvement in resource-constrained rural contexts

Feelings of professional isolation are common among rural teachers. In Australia, educators report a sense of abandonment by the education system and limited institutional support, correlating with heightened turnover intentions [27]. In the United States and Canada, geographic isolation and small staff sizes restrict collaboration and mentorship opportunities, worsening professional seclusion [28]. In South Africa, rural educators frequently feel neglected by policymakers, as inadequate funding and scarce attention force them to manage complex challenges with limited resources [29]. Community attitudes also play a pivotal role. Where educators are respected, local volunteers and leaders may provide moral support and practical assistance; sceptical or negative attitudes towards formal education undermine teacher morale and job satisfaction [30].

3 METHODOLOGY

Ten public schools located in three mountainous rural districts of Sulaymaniyah Governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, constituted the research setting. Each campus lies 45–120 kilometres from the nearest city, and the journey requires one-to-three hours on unmetalled roads. Average class size is 20 learners (range 15–20); the two smallest schools combine grades in a single classroom because they employ only one English teacher. None of the ten campuses has a functioning computer laboratory, library, or internet connection, and electricity cuts are routine, producing classrooms with limited light and ventilation.

Fifteen English-language teachers, eight females and seven males, participated. Eight teach grades 7–9; ages 12–15 and seven teach grades 10–12; ages 16–18. Teaching experience is distributed as follows: four early-career teachers (2-5 years), six mid-career teachers (6-15 years), and five veteran teachers (16-26 years); the group mean is twelve years. All hold at least a bachelor's degree in English or English Education; three possess postgraduate diplomas and two hold Master of Arts degrees in TESOL. Every participant is a native of the Kurdistan Region, bilingual in Kurdish and English, and five are additionally proficient in Arabic. All have served in their current rural posts for a minimum of two consecutive academic years.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling in collaboration with the district education directorates. Eligibility criteria required active teaching of English in grades 7–12, a current rural posting, and at least two years of professional experience. All fifteen eligible teachers agreed to take part, yielding a 100 percent response rate. Ethical approval was granted by the Cihan University-Sulaimaniya Research Ethics Committee. Written consent was obtained, and pseudonyms Teacher 1–Teacher 15, and so on are used throughout. Interview recordings and transcripts are stored on an encrypted, access-restricted server.

Interview audio files were transcribed verbatim and analysed with [31] six-phase inductive thematic analysis procedure. Two researchers independently familiarised themselves with the data, generated line-by-line open codes, and then met to merge the initial code lists into a provisional codebook of forty-eight items.

For reliability, both coders applied the codebook to two additional transcripts. Percentage agreement reached 87 percent; disagreements were resolved through discussion and code refinement. The revised codebook was then applied to all remaining transcripts using NVivo 14. An audit trail documenting coding decision, theme development, and analytic memos was maintained throughout the process.

A certified bilingual researcher translated Kurdish passages into English; a second bilingual colleague conducted back-translation checks and reconciled any semantic discrepancies. Verified English renditions are used for all quotations. The analysis generated five themes: inadequate teaching materials and facilities; low student motivation and language

preparedness; limited parental involvement; insufficient professional development and institutional support; and teacher agency and coping strategies. Gender-related nuances intersect several themes and are highlighted in the Findings section.

4 RESULTS

The interviews with rural English teachers revealed a set of interrelated challenges that they consistently face. These challenges align with, but also elaborate on, the themes identified in the literature review. Teachers described chronic shortages of materials and poor infrastructure, difficulties motivating students with low exposure to English, limited support from parents, gaps in their own training and development, and a general sense of being unsupported by the broader system. Despite these obstacles, many teachers also shared how they try to cope or find small sources of support and motivation. We present the main themes that emerged, supported by direct quotations from the participants. To provide context, each quoted teacher is identified by a number (Teacher 1, Teacher 2…) along with brief relevant details if applicable.

4.I NADEQUATE TEACHING MATERIALS AND FACILITIES

All participants emphasized the severe lack of teaching resources in their schools. This theme was the most dominant, as teachers reported that insufficient materials and outdated facilities fundamentally impede their ability to teach effectively. Many rural schools in Kurdistan have not received new English textbooks or supplementary materials for years. Teacher 7 explained that the only textbooks available are *Sunrise* (the government-provided English textbook series), and many copies are worn or shared between students: *"We don't even have enough textbooks for each student; some have to share, and there are no story books or readers at all".* Supplementary resources like audio CDs or visual aids are virtually non-existent. Over half of the interviewed teachers mentioned that their classrooms lack basic supplies such as flashcards, posters, or realia that could make English lessons more engaging.

Beyond consumable materials, technological resources are also missing. Several schools do not have functioning language labs or even a single computer in the classroom. Teacher 1 (7 years of teaching experience in remote villages) explained the consequence of this: *"I tried to use different types of teaching methods to teach better, but I couldn't because I don't have access to a computer and internet".* In this school, there was no internet connectivity and no projector or computer for teacher use, effectively preventing the teacher from utilizing multimedia resources like videos, songs, or online exercises. Teacher 1's frustration was profound as he described wanting to show his students English clips or use educational software to reinforce lessons, only to be limited by the absence of any tools. This sentiment was repeated by Teacher 4, who lamented that even when she creates PowerPoint slides at home, she has no way to project them in her classroom, which lacks electricity for part of the day.

Facilities in rural schools were also described as insufficient. A number of teachers mentioned large classes held in overcrowded, poorly lit rooms with broken furniture. Teacher 11 recounted teaching in a classroom with a leaking roof during the winter rains: *"When it rained, water would drip in one corner of the room, and we had to move the students to the other side. It's very distracting and shows how little maintenance our school gets."* Such conditions contribute to a learning environment that is not conducive to concentration or interactive activities. Teacher 9 mentioned that during summer, the lack of fans or air conditioning, due to electricity outages, makes the afternoon classes very difficult for students to pay attention.

4.2 LOW STUDENT MOTIVATION AND LANGUAGE PREPAREDNESS

Another prominent theme was the low motivation and engagement of students in learning English. According to the participants, many rural students exhibit a disinterest in English or a belief that they cannot master it. This lack of motivation is both a cause and effect of the other challenges. Teacher 10, with 10 years of experience in a village school, provided a representative observation: *"Unfortunately, a lot of my students find it hard to learn, and the problem is their mindset. They keep thinking that they will never learn English. That leads to losing interest in learning".* This quote highlights a defeatist attitude that teachers often encounter.

Most teachers (12 out of 15) explicitly mentioned "lack of interest" among students as a core issue. This was often linked to limited exposure to English outside school. In these rural areas, the daily life of students rarely requires English. Unlike urban students who might encounter English in media, internet cafes, or encounters with tourists, rural Kurdish students live in largely monolingual communities. Teacher 3 explained that her students rarely hear English spoken outside her classroom: *"They only see English in the class and maybe on their phone if they use Facebook. It's not around them, so they don't feel it's alive or useful".* This lack of contextual relevance makes it challenging for teachers to convince students of the importance of English. Some students view English as just another subject required to pass exams, without intrinsic motivation to acquire the language.

Another factor contributing to low motivation is the difficulty students face due to weak prior knowledge. Several teachers noted that by the time students reach intermediate grades, many still struggle with basic vocabulary and grammar that should have been learned in primary school. Teacher 6 described a typical scenario: *"I teach seventh grade, but I have students who cannot form a simple sentence like 'This is a pen' correctly. They feel embarrassed and give up easily".*

When the curriculum moves forward assuming certain basics that the students have not mastered, it results in frustration. Students become demoralized when lessons go over their heads, and teachers face the dilemma of whether to slow down, and risk not covering the syllabus, or push through, and leave many behind. Most teachers said they try to simplify and review basics continually, but this is time-consuming and not always effective if class sizes are large.

The challenge of multi-grade classes or mixed-ability groups in one classroom was mentioned by a few teachers, which ties into student motivation. In some smaller village schools, due to teacher shortages, one teacher might handle multiple grade levels together for English, or students of the same grade might have vastly different competency levels. In such situations, the more advanced or motivated students could progress, while the others feel lost and disengage. Teacher 2 reported trying to use peer support by pairing stronger students with weaker ones, but with limited success: *"Sometimes the good students help the others, but other times they get bored or the weaker ones just copy without learning".*

Teachers share that a minority of their students are keen on learning English, often those who have personal aspirations like pursuing higher education or who have seen family members benefit from knowing English. These students can sometimes inspire their peers. For instance, Teacher 8 observed that when one enthusiastic student started using a few English phrases in casual conversation, some others got curious and tried to mimic him.

4.3 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Teachers' experiences with parents in rural communities emerged as a mixed but crucial theme. Parental involvement in student learning varied widely, with some teachers reporting cooperative relationships and others describing indifference or absence of support. We specifically asked teachers whether parents take interest in their children's education and assist with English learning at home. The responses revealed roughly three groups; a few teachers felt parents were generally supportive, some believed parents were not at all involved, and others saw occasional or minimal involvement.

Out of 15 teachers, 9 indicated that *yes*, parents of their students were involved to some extent; 2 said *no*, parents never get involved; and 4 characterized parental involvement as *occasional or inconsistent*. Teacher 1 was among those with a positive view, stating, *"Yes, parents are involved and aware of their children's education".* This teacher, from a relatively small village, noted that parents would come to school events and inquire about their child's progress, and some even tried to help with English homework despite their own limited English skills. Teacher 1 felt that this moral support from parents had a beneficial impact on student attitude: *"When the family cares, the student at least tries harder. I have a couple of boys whose fathers always check that they do the homework, those boys are doing better".*

Teacher 9 had an opposite experience, replying, *"No, parents never get involved in their children's education."* In his context many parents were illiterate or had very low education, and they saw schooling as the teachers' responsibility exclusively. He mentioned that even when report cards are sent home or meetings are scheduled, few parents attend: *"If I call for a meeting about their child failing English, maybe two parents will come. The rest don't show up. They are busy or they don't understand the importance".* This lack of engagement can leave teachers feeling unsupported and students without reinforcement of the value of education at home.

Teacher 11 provided a nuanced perspective, saying, *"I think some of them, not all, are involved in their children's education".* This indicates a scenario where within the same community, parental attitudes differ. Perhaps more educated or younger parents might be more involved, whereas others are not. Teacher 11 observed that mothers tried to encourage their children, when possible, whereas fathers were often too occupied with work. She recounted that a few parents would occasionally ask her for advice on how they could help their child learn English but such proactive parents were the minority.

Several teachers linked parental involvement to socio-economic factors. Families that are struggling financially or come from farming backgrounds may prioritize children's contribution to household work over study time. During peak agricultural seasons, some students miss school to help their families, and parents condone this as necessary. Teacher 5 noted that during harvest time, her class attendance dropped and parents did not consider this problematic, whereas she felt it severely set back the students' learning. As some teachers pointed out, parents who lack education may feel they have nothing to contribute academically. They might value education in the abstract but feel powerless to assist. This was highlighted by Teacher 14: *"Most parents here can't speak English at all, so they think they cannot help. They leave it all to me. I told them even just checking if the child did homework or encouraging them matters, but I'm not sure they do it".*

4.4 LIMITED TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

The fourth theme centres on the professional challenges faced by teachers, particularly the lack of training opportunities and limited support for their professional growth. Most participants indicated that they had received little formal training specifically tailored to English Language teaching or to the realities of working rural contexts. While all the teachers held at least a bachelor's degree in English or education, as required for teaching positions in the region, continuous professional development after entering service was described as scarce.

When asked about training programs or workshops they had attended, the responses varied. A few teachers had participated in one or two training sessions, while others had never attended any. Teacher 15, a mid-career teacher, said, *"Yes, I have attended two training programs, one on teaching the Sunrise curriculum and one on improving English speaking".* These were likely short-term courses provided by the Ministry of Education or international NGOs. Teacher 15 found them somewhat helpful, particularly the speaking workshop which introduced new classroom activities. Teacher 9 admitted, *"No, I haven't attended any training programs since I started teaching".* He explained that most training sessions happen in the city and often teachers in remote schools either don't hear about them in time or cannot leave their post due to lack of substitute teachers. Even those who did attend occasional trainings Reported that these were not part of sustained efforts. One-off workshops provide ideas and inspiration, but without ongoing support or follow-up, it was challenging to implement changes. Teacher 4 commented, *"I went to a one-week TESOL course two years ago. It was great, but then I came back to my school and it was hard to apply what I learned with no resources. Also, nobody from the Ministry came to check or help later. It felt very isolated".* This highlights that training in isolation, without structural support, has limited impact.

Mentorship and collegial support were also limited for these rural teachers. Several participants were the only English teacher in their school, meaning they lack immediate colleagues with whom to share ideas or challenges in English teaching. Teacher 12 described this isolation: *"In my school I'm the only English teacher. There is no one to observe or to ask for advice about my teaching. I just try things on my own".* Some teachers mentioned they participated in informal WhatsApp or Facebook groups with other English teachers in Kurdistan, which serve as informal support networks to exchange teaching tips or materials.

Support from the education authorities was also viewed as minimal. None of the teachers reported regular visits from English subject supervisors or pedagogical coaches. The Ministry of Education has supervisor roles to monitor and guide teachers, but in practice, rural teachers said they rarely see them. Teacher 6 recalled a single visit from a supervisor three years ago, which was more of an inspection than supportive coaching: *"He came and observed one class, gave some general comments, and left. We need more than that, we need someone to guide us, especially with new methods".* The absence of ongoing professional support leaves teachers to rely on their own creativity. This lack of support also extends to motivations for career development. A few teachers noted that rural postings often feel like a dead-end in terms of promotion or recognition. Teacher 7 expressed this sentiment *"It's like we are forgotten out here. If you want to advance or do a master's degree, you'd have to move to the city. But we are needed here".*

4.5 GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Support While not a primary focus of our research questions, we observed some minor differences in the challenges emphasized by female versus male teachers, which merit brief discussion. Both female and male teachers reported largely similar challenges (resources, student motivation…), but a few nuanced gender-related differences emerged during the interviews.

Female teachers tended to highlight issues related to parental perceptions and their own emotional labour slightly more often. Two female teachers mentioned that some parents in conservative rural areas were initially hesitant about their daughters learning English or being taught by a young female teacher. Over time, as teachers built trust in the community, this hesitancy diminished, but it added an additional emotional and social burden early. Female teachers also noted emotional stress related to balancing teaching with familial expectations. Teacher 8, a mother of young children, spoke about the challenge of managing her household duties after school and how a lack of community services made it harder for her to dedicate extra time to school activities compared to some male colleagues who had fewer domestic responsibilities. She said, *"I often grade papers late at night after my kids sleep. It's exhausting, but I have to manage. Sometimes I wish there were more support systems for women teachers in rural areas".*

Male teachers, on the other hand, spoke more about infrastructural deficiencies and classroom discipline challenges. A couple of male teachers highlighted disciplinary problems or student misbehaviour, tying it to lack of engagement. It is possible that male teachers, especially younger ones, faced challenges asserting authority in certain large classes. Teacher 9 (male) noted, *"Some of the older boys in my class skip or don't pay attention. They treat English class as a joke sometimes".* He felt that local community attitudes towards schooling and foreign language learning influenced such behaviour. While female teachers also reported low student motivation, male teachers were somewhat more likely to frame the issues as a disciplinary or behavioural concern.

Another point was that female teachers more frequently mentioned relying on or lacking familial support to enable them to teach in rural areas. One female teacher indicated that her placement was far from her hometown, requiring her to live in a teacher housing during the week; an experience she found emotionally taxing. Meanwhile, male teachers in her area Were less likely to face scrutiny or concern from their families about living away from home.

Table 1. Major Themes and Representative Quotes

Theme	Representative Quote from Participants
Inadequate Teaching Materials and Facilities	"We don't even have enough textbooks for each student; some have to share". *(Teacher 7)*
Low Student Motivation and Preparedness	"A lot of my students think they will never learn English. That leads to losing interest". *(Teacher 10)*
Lack of Parental Involvement	"Parents here are so busy with work and survival that they have no time to check homework". *(Teacher 9)*
Insufficient Teacher Training and Support	"In my 10 years of teaching, I have not attended any English teaching workshop – we're pretty much on our own". *(Teacher 3)*
Teacher Agency and Resilience	"I started making my own materials and activities. If I wait for the official support, I will wait forever". *(Teacher 4)*
Gender-Related Challenges	"As a female teacher, it's difficult to travel to a far village school every day; my family worries if I come home late". *(Teacher 13)*

5 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on multifaceted and interrelated challenges faced by English teachers in rural Kurdistan and resonate strongly with patterns documented in other rural educational contexts. In this section, we discuss each of the major findings in relation to the existing literature, highlighting both alignments and distinctive features of the Kurdistan context. We also interpret what these challenges imply for teacher agency and resource equity, which are critical considerations in current educational debates.

5.1 INADEQUATE TEACHING MATERIALS AND FACILITIES

Our participants' reports of insufficient teaching materials and poor school infrastructure mirror global observations of rural-urban resource disparities. The chronic shortage of textbooks, technology, and basic facilities in Kurdistan's rural schools exemplifies what [29] described in South Africa; rural schools suffer from a lack of resources and funding, creating barriers to effective education. The fact that teachers in our study still rely on outdated materials or lack internet access is systemic and sustained neglect. This resource inequity represents a clear case of educational injustice; rural students are not being offered the same quality of learning environment as their urban peers. The literature emphasizes that such inequities contribute to persistent achievement gaps between rural and urban students [32].

Given that Kurdistan is an oil-rich region undergoing significant development, these findings raise pressing questions about educational policy priorities. There is an urgent need for targeted resource allocation. For instance, initiatives like mobile libraries or rural learning hubs, as implemented by [33] in India, could help mitigate shortages. Investment in infrastructure, ensuring every rural school has electricity, heating/cooling, and internet, is fundamental. The lack of these basics in some of our participants' schools suggests that policy reforms are required to integrate rural schools into the broader modernization efforts. As a positive note, this study highlights the ingenuity of teachers who often create their own teaching aids or find workarounds, reflecting strong teacher agency in the face of resource constraints.

5.2 LOW STUDENT MOTIVATION AND PREPAREDNESS

The issue of low student motivation is another challenge shared by rural educational system globally, and is often tied to limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Our findings echo [22], who found that rural Malaysian students, while aware of English's importance, did not see its immediate relevance and were less inclined to engage in learning. This often leads to negative attitudes and a self-fulfilling cycle of poor performance.

In our study, teachers described students' sentiment that English is "not for them". This mirrors findings from rural Colombia, where English was perceived as unrelated to students' local realities [29]. One key implication is the importance of localizing and contextualizing English education [23]. Scholars such as [23] argue that curriculum content should connect with students' local experiences. In Kurdistan's rural context, this could mean incorporating local themes, Kurdish-English comparisons, or practical vocabulary related to students' daily life (farming, family, community) into English lessons to spark interest.

The data also suggest that improving English instruction in the early grades might help prevent some disappointment and disengagement observed in later years. When students build a solid foundation and confidence in primary school, they may approach secondary-level English with reduced anxiety. This connects to the broader debate About the timing and method of introducing English in non-English-dominant settings. Some recent policy shifts, like Mongolia's plan to start English from grade 3, as noted by [34] reflect a belief that earlier exposure, when implemented effectively, can benefit rural learners. Our study reinforces that earlier introduction alone is insufficient; without adequate quality and support, it is unlikely to resolve motivation issues. Our findings emphasize that student motivation in rural areas is closely linked to perceived relevance and experiences of success. When students see tangible progress and understand the purpose behind learning English, their engagement tends to increase.

5.3 LACK OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The mixed levels of parental involvement observed in our study confirm that rural communities are not monolithic; there is diversity in attitudes and capacities among parents. The general trend of lower parental involvement in education in rural areas is well-documented. As [29] noted, a lack of parental interest is a barrier in many rural schools. Our findings add nuance; it's not purely disinterest, but often a combination of socio-economic pressure, lack of education, and unawareness of how to help. The implication for practice is that schools and governments should not give up on parental engagement, but rather adapt strategies to the rural context. For example, community meetings might need to be scheduled around farming cycles, or schools might provide simple bilingual guides to parents on how to assist with homework.

Large-scale analyses show that parental engagement in low-income agrarian regions drops sharply during harvest and market cycles, suggesting that time poverty rather than apathy is the principal constraint [35]. Ethnographic work in sub-Saharan Africa likewise reports that parents value schooling but feel ill-equipped to help when teaching content surpasses their own literacy, particularly in English as a foreign language [36]. These studies align with our Kurdish data, indicating that any engagement strategy must first acknowledge parents' work rhythms and limited educational capital before expecting sustained participation.

Evidence from family-literacy interventions in rural China and India points to practical solutions transferable to Kurdistan. Short, school-based workshops that demonstrate interactive reading techniques increased home support for language tasks and produced measurable gains in student vocabulary after one term [37]. Success depended on offering sessions at convenient times, providing materials the family could use immediately, and using the local language for instruction while modelling simple English phrases. Implementing comparable micro-workshops, held after peak farming hours and accompanied by take-home bilingual booklets, could harness the goodwill that parents already possess, converting latent interest into concrete academic assistance.

5.4 INSUFFICIENT TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT

The scarcity of professional development opportunities for our rural teachers mirrors trends in many developing regions. As [21] and [38] have emphasized in contexts like India and South Africa, rural teachers often miss out on training routinely accessed by their urban counterparts. This contributes to a sense of professional stagnation and can undermine teacher efficacy. Despite these constraints, our research highlights the remarkable agency of rural teachers. They actively pursue self-improvement through online learning or by forming informal support networks. This aligns with the concept of teacher agency explored by [39] in rural Bangladesh, where teachers, despite systemic pressures, exercised autonomy in adapting curriculum and methods to suit their students.

In our study, teachers' agency was evident in practices such as creating custom materials and negotiating with principals to adjust timetables to give extra English support to weaker students. Teacher agency is a crucial asset; it means teachers are not just passive victims of circumstance but active problem-solvers. Agency has its limits when structural barriers are overwhelming. Continuous neglect can erode even the most dedicated teacher's motivation. The discussion of training and support gaps in Kurdistan suggests that to retain skilled teachers in rural areas, the education system must provide pathways for growth and recognition. This could include establishing regular rural teacher training workshops, perhaps using a train-the-trainer model where one teacher from each district is trained intensively and then becomes a local trainer.

Modern technology can also be leveraged. E-mentoring programs could connect rural teachers with experienced mentors via online platforms, lessening the isolation. Our study draws attention to teacher well-being. The mental and emotional load on rural teachers, who often feel "forgotten," can lead to burnout. Policies that offer incentives for rural service, and that publicly acknowledge the extra mile these teachers go, could improve retention. In Kurdistan's case, acknowledging teachers' efforts in conflict-affected and rural areas post-ISIS era could be part of a broader narrative of rebuilding and resilience, which might attract support from international agencies as well.

To frame these findings in theoretical terms, we can see our participants' actions through the lens of teacher agency. Our data provide evidence of this. Teachers achieved agency by responding creatively to problematic situations (like inventing materials when none were provided, or altering pedagogy to suit context). Their agency was exercised within and against the ecological conditions of rural schooling. We also see overlaps with literature on teacher resilience, which often highlights factors like a strong sense of purpose, problem-solving skills, and social support as key to sustaining teachers in adverse settings. Indeed, our rural teachers embodied resilience by not only withstanding hardships but by finding ways to thrive professionally, even if in modest ways.

5.5 GENDER-RELATED DIFFERENCES

The gendered patterns visible in our data echo feminist critiques of labour distribution in Kurdish society. Female participants described additional social surveillance and the expectation that they shoulder both professional and domestic duties [40]. When parents initially question the legitimacy of a young woman teaching English, the teacher must expend emotional energy to gain trust before pedagogical work can progress. This early scrutiny delays instructional momentum

and amplifies emotional labour. Such dynamics illustrate how broader gender ideologies penetrate the classroom, shaping teacher–community relations and subtly influencing girls' access to language learning.

International research on gender and teacher agency underscores the structural roots of these burdens. Comparative studies in low-income rural contexts show that female teachers experience heavier demands for relational work, managing community expectations and caring roles, while male colleagues' direct effort toward disciplinary control and infrastructural complaints [41]. Emotional-labour analyses further document how women in teaching navigate contradictory expectations of warmth and authority, often without formal recognition or institutional support [42]. Our findings align with that scholarship: female teachers invested extra time in relationship building and out-of-hours preparation, whereas male teachers focused on enforcing classroom order amid resource scarcity.

Policy responses must address these gendered disparities to retain skilled educators in remote villages. Research on teacher resilience highlights that targeted support, secure housing, transport allowances, and locally delivered professional development, mitigates attrition among women balancing professional and family roles [43]. Allocating resources for community outreach led by female role models could also shift parental perceptions, gradually normalising women's authority in rural schools. Interventions designed with a gender lens would therefore enhance both teacher wellbeing and learner outcomes, ensuring that the systemic challenge of English provision does not perpetuate existing gender inequities.

5.6 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There is a pressing need for policymakers to address the urban-rural resource gap. The government (Ministry of Education of the Kurdistan Regional Government) should prioritize improved funding and resource distribution to rural schools. This includes ensuring a steady supply of up-to-date English textbooks and providing supplementary English learning materials. Investments in basic infrastructure are equally crucial. Rural schools should be equipped with reliable electricity and internet access, at least at a level that enables use of audio-visual teaching tools. Initiatives such as solar panels for electricity in off-grid schools or partnerships with telecom companies to extend internet to remote areas could be explored. Given the current economic constraints in the region, these investments may be challenging, but they are fundamental for levelling the playing field. In the long run, neglecting rural educational resources perpetuates regional disparities in learning outcomes. Even modest steps, like annually updating and redistributing surplus materials from urban to rural schools, could yield immediate benefits.

The government and educational NGOs should design professional development programs specifically tailored for rural teachers. One practical approach is to establish mobile training units or regional training centres that bring workshops closer to where rural teachers work, reducing the travel barrier. Scheduling training during school holidays or providing teacher release time can enable rural teachers, especially female teachers with family duties, to attend. The content of these trainings should also be context-specific. For instance, methodologies for multilevel classrooms, strategies for motivating underprepared learners, and improvisational use of local resources in teaching. Our findings also suggest implementing a mentorship or peer network program. Experienced mentor teachers could be assigned to coach rural teachers through periodic school visits or regular virtual meetings.

To attract and retain skilled teachers in rural areas, the Ministry of Education could introduce incentive schemes. This might include financial incentives, rural hardship allowances, housing or transportation stipends for those commuting to distant schools, and career incentives, fast-track promotion or recognition for teachers who complete a certain tenure in a rural post. Such measures would acknowledge the extra challenges of rural teaching and value the commitment of those who take on these roles. In the current socio-political climate, teacher salaries and morale have been a subject of debate; integrating a rural incentive into broader teacher welfare reforms could both improve morale and ensure that remote schools are staffed with qualified, motivated teachers. Gender-sensitive incentives could be considered, for instance, additional support for female teachers, such as ensuring schools have secure staff accommodations for women who relocate, or establishing mentorship networks among women teachers, to encourage more women to serve in rural communities.

The lack of sustained community and institutional support highlighted in our findings ties into larger policy discussions on how to make educational development inclusive. The Kurdistan Region's education strategy in recent years has aimed to improve quality, but our research suggests that a lack of rural sensitivity may inadvertently exacerbate inequality. Government and NGO programs must be designed or adapted for rural contexts. For example, if a national program distributes digital devices for learning, rural schools without electricity or internet might be left out. Infrastructure development must accompany such initiatives. To improve sustainability, a cluster support model could be considered: designating a central school in each region as a resource hub, staffed with mentors who provide regular support to surrounding village schools.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of fifteen rural English teachers in Kurdistan revealed persistent deficiencies deficits in instructional materials, technology, professional development, community support, and student motivation. In response, teachers demonstrated resilience by creating improvised resources, contextualizing lessons, collaborating with peers, and engaging local patrons. Equitable resource allocation requires textbooks, libraries, reliable utilities, and stable internet connectivity in every rural school. Policymakers should allocate funding to basic infrastructure upgrades and implement district-level training workshops alongside regular mentorship visits. Curricula must incorporate culturally relevant content and extracurricular English initiatives to strengthen learner engagement and parental involvement. To support teacher retention and improve instructional quality, targeted policies, such as rural service incentives, public recognition programs, and clear professional advancement pathways, are essential for sustaining motivation and performance in under-resourced rural settings.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We declare no conflict of interest.

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