



Teaching in Rural Indonesian Schools: Teachers' Challenges

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Abstract

The Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education of Indonesia has prioritized education in the disadvantaged, outermost, and frontier regions (3T) by implementing a program called *Sarjana Mendidik di daerah Terdepan, Terluar, dan Tertinggal* (SM-3T), which is a year program for teacher education graduates to devote their lives teaching in the rural areas of Indonesia. The government sees the importance of promoting education in rural areas as a shared responsibility that must be done as a form of devotion to the nation. Every year the government sends thousands of teachers of various subjects as an effort to meet the needs of teachers in rural areas, which is still far from enough. Teachers who in fact come from urban areas certainly experience many challenges when they teach in rural areas with lack of facilities. This paper aims at finding out the challenges faced by teachers, especially English language teachers in carrying out teaching and learning activities in rural Indonesian schools. Framed by a humanistic perspective, questionnaires and in-depth interviews were employed as data collection techniques in this narrative case study. Furthermore, this study is expected to contribute to the teacher professional development in the rural areas.

Keywords: SM-3T; English Language Teaching; Rural Areas; Teacher Professional Development

Introduction

“Building Indonesia from the periphery by strengthening the regions and villages within the framework of a unitary state” is the third agenda of Nawacita (Nine priorities of national development agenda). This commitment reflects the current Indonesian government's concerns that prioritize development in the disadvantaged, outermost, and frontier regions (3T). It is implemented in various programs, one of which is the SM-3T program enacted by the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education of Indonesia. The SM-3T, which stands for *Sarjana Mendidik di daerah Terdepan, Terluar, dan Tertinggal* (Graduates Educating in the Disadvantaged, Outermost, and Frontier Regions), is a year program for teacher education graduates to teach in rural areas of Indonesia. This program is mainly intended to overcome the shortage of teachers in those aforementioned regions. The common reason why rural Indonesian schools are lack of teachers is because most teachers prefer to work in urban schools which provides more adequate facilities rather than in rural schools. Wang (2006) stated that it is difficult to invite teachers to teach in underdeveloped rural areas; as a result, schools in rural areas are left with old and less competent teachers.

The government sees the importance of promoting education in rural areas as a shared responsibility that must be done as a form of devotion to the nation. Every year Indonesian government sends thousands of teachers for various subjects to rural areas as an effort to meet the need for teachers through several programs such as the SM-3T program. Various challenges, however, exist in the rural areas of Indonesia in advancing education, particularly the challenges facing the teachers. Several studies have investigated the challenges experienced by teachers in rural Indonesian schools. Myriad Research (2015) conducting a study in rural and remote areas in Papuan provinces, Indonesia, revealed that teachers had to teach multiple early grade classrooms because of a lack of teachers, and teachers' academic backgrounds often mismatched their subjects. Hidayah & Marhaeni (2016), conducting a study that evaluated the SM-3T program in Ende Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia, also reported that due to the shortage of teachers, some school subjects are taught by those without relevant qualification; for example, history is taught by mathematics teacher. In addition, many teachers have dual roles as Raggl in Smit et al. (2015) stated that teachers in small schools share certain characteristics, such as dual roles; for example, a head teacher who also becomes a classroom teacher.

Some others emphasized that several challenges were due to the remote locations of the schools. Prouty (2012) studying the phenomenon of teachers absenteeism in Papua and West Papua, Indonesia, stated that the access to the schools was one of the challenges facing the teachers in Papua and West Papua. One of the reasons the high rate of teacher absenteeism was due to the access to the schools. Schools in easy-to-access districts had relatively lower level of teacher absenteeism than schools in lowland hard-to-access districts, indicating that the access to the schools was one of the challenges facing the teachers in those regions. Luschei & Zubaidah (2012) conducting a case study in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia, claimed that the challenge for upgrading skills and knowledge of primary teachers was enormous and more acute in remote rural regions. In this current study, the challenges facing teachers in remote rural areas were explored more deeply through the stories told by SM-3T teachers, especially English language teachers, who spent their lives teaching in rural Indonesian schools.

Literature Review

Rural Indonesian Schools

Education condition in the rural areas of Indonesia attracts the attention of the government. Luschei & Zubaidah (2012) stated that "the greatest educational challenge facing Indonesia is the country's vast geography and many remote areas" (p. 337). Hargreaves et al. (2009) stated that rural schools are inferior compared to urban schools because urban schools have more teachers and easier access to resources for teaching and learning. Teachers in urban schools have much access to teaching materials, while teachers in rural areas often lack of teaching materials that can support them in delivering their lessons in the classroom. This condition leads to monotonous teaching and learning process.

The teachers' quality in rural Indonesian schools is also different from the teachers' quality in urban schools. OECD, Asian Development Bank (2015) reported that rural and remote Indonesian schools "often lack qualified teachers" (p. 271). Wang (2006) asserted that most rural teachers continue to exercise tight control of the classroom, and lecturing takes up most of the class time. Teachers tend to take almost all the time without giving enough time for students to share their ideas or ask questions. In addition to lack of competent teachers, UNICEF Indonesia (2016) claimed that teachers in remote and rural areas do not have adequate training on integrating health, nutrition, safety and psycho-social stimulation for early childhood development, resulting in many cases of childhood stunting. This eventually affects the children's educational development.

SM-3T Program as Teacher Professional Development

Government and private parties in Indonesia are organizing programs to support education in rural areas, such as *Sarjana Mendidik di daerah Terdepan, Terluar, dan Tertinggal (SM-3T)*, *Indonesia Mengajar*, and *Sekolah Guru Indonesia*. These programs send young teachers from all over the country to many schools in rural and remote areas. The young teachers will devote their lives for a year teaching in those rural schools, and are expected to revive the education atmosphere in the schools. Their existence becomes a hope to advance education in rural and remote areas by conditioning the schools not only as the places to gain knowledge but also as the centers of social activities in these areas. This is in line with a study conducted by Autti & Hyry-Belhammer (2014) revealing that the schools in rural areas are not only a place to educate children but also the center of village's social lives.

The SM-3T Program is a year program for teacher education graduates to devote their lives teaching in the rural areas of Indonesia which is disadvantaged, outermost, and frontier (3T) regions as a professional teacher preparation which will be followed up with Teacher Professional Education Program. The goal is helping the rural area overcome educational problems especially the shortage of teachers. It provides teacher education graduates with experiences as a form of professional attitude, nationalism, patriotism, care, empathy, and problem-solving as a part of developing education in rural Indonesian schools.

After completing SM-3T program, the young teachers will join professional education for becoming a teacher in a program called Teacher Professionalism Program (Program Profesi Guru, PPG). For Teacher Professionalism Program the young teachers will spend one year education in *Lembaga Penyedia Tenaga Kependidikan (LPTK)* to improve their teaching skills as a part of teacher professional development. After graduating from the teacher professionalism program provided by the LPTK, the young teachers are expected to join a government program called Frontline Teachers (*Guru Garis Depan*) which gives the chance for them to become civil servant teachers by devoting their life to teach in the rural schools for about 10 years. This program is the effort of the Indonesian government to conduct educational equity in Indonesia.

Methodology

This study aimed at finding out the challenges faced by teachers in rural Indonesian schools by using a narrative case study. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) postulated that "narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through collaboration between researcher and participants in the certain place" (p. 2). The problems encountered by SM-3T teachers when they taught in rural Indonesian schools for one year are narratively explored.

As a narrative study, the stories in this study were collected from seventeen SM-3T teachers from each major island of Indonesia, namely Sumatera, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Papua, and Nusa Tenggara. Those seventeen SM-3T teachers taught at seventeen different Junior High Schools in rural area. The techniques of data collection were open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews which were resulted into the transcriptions. After data collection, the research data were analyzed by using Constant Comparative Method (CCM). Constant Comparative Method is the process used in the qualitative research in which any newly collected data is compared with previously collected data that were collected in one or more earlier studies. Morse & Field (1998) stated that each piece of data must be compared with every other piece of relevant data.

Result and Discussion

From the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, several challenges facing the SM-3T teachers during their time teaching in rural Indonesian schools are drawn, namely 1) infrastructure; 2) source of learning; 3) language barrier; 4) parent mindset; 5) inadequacy of teachers; 6) student competence, and 7) student mindset. These challenges are described as the following:

1. Infrastructure

Infrastructure plays an important role in teaching and learning process. Sufficient infrastructure can help students effectively follow teaching and learning process. Teaching and learning process in rural Indonesian schools mostly takes place in inadequate infrastructure. It is because most schools in rural areas are new schools which are limited in facilities. In line with this fact, the T-3 respondent (teacher 3) said that his school was a new school in which the facilities were not sufficient to support students' needs.

*Because the school where I taught was a relatively new school, its facilities were **still inadequate**, such as the **shortage** of chairs, tables, and blackboards for three classrooms and one teacher's room. Likewise, the library facilities and canteen are **not yet available**. Another problem is the **lack of electricity** so teachers had difficult to show videos or play English songs (T-3, November 2017).*

In addition, the T-3 also said that the lack of electricity in his school became a problem that made it difficult for him to prepare materials for teaching. There was also little support from school principals for providing and improving school facilities. The locations students had to go through from their houses to schools were relatively far with poor conditions of streets and inadequate means of transportation.

*The school had only two classrooms where there was **no adequate** room divider to separate the two classes. The condition of the blackboard was **bad** and the number of chalks was **limited**. Finally, it was **difficult** to prepare teaching materials due to no electricity (T-5, November 2017).*

*The distance from children's houses to the school was about 4-5 km with a **loose stone road**. The school facilities were **inadequate** and there was **no effort** from the principal to provide more school facilities (T-10, November 2017).*

*The school was in the middle of **isolated village**, which can only be accessed via river by boat for 6 hours from the nearest town. There was **no internet signal** and **very limited electricity** (T-7, November 2017).*

2. Source of Learning

Source of learning is a component of teaching and learning process that can assist teachers in delivering teaching materials to students at schools. The availability of sufficient books as a source of learning in schools makes it easier for students to understand the lessons taught by the teachers. The second challenge facing the teachers in rural Indonesian schools is the lack of learning sources. It is shown from the interview data submitted by the T-1 respondent. In the interview, it is mentioned that the T-1's school has limited facilities, such as the supporting learning books are not available, while the learning media are not worth using.

*Facilities were **very minimal**. There were **no new supporting** books and learning media from the central government. There were only **a few** and their conditions were **not proper** to be used (T-1, November 2017).*

The absence of books as a source of learning for teachers and students leads to learning that focuses only on teachers, with teachers delivering lessons in one-way communication. This was conveyed by the T-2 respondent who also mentioned that only a few students bringing dictionary to school which is also an obstacle in English teaching and learning process. In addition, the dictionary is also far from adequate because it consists of only a few words that cannot meet the needs of students.

*Textbooks available were **old editions** and were **only for teachers**, and thus the learning process was **teacher-centered**. Only a few students had pocket dictionary which was **incomplete** (T-2, November 2017).*

For old schools, there are books sent by the government. However, there are constraints in maintenance and storage. In one of the respondents' schools, youths living around the school destroyed the books, so the books could not be used as the supporting resources for teaching and learning process.

*The books that were still intact and with good conditions were only a few. The rest were **lost and got burned**. There was a drunken young man who entered the classroom and burned some of the books in the closet. The door of the classroom **cannot be locked** when the activity in school was over (T-5, November 2017).*

The Indonesian government has a tendency to change the curriculum over time, which also affects the books being used. Old schools still used old printed books not relevant to current conditions. This was revealed by the T-16 respondent as follows.

*The existing books were still **old printed** books with **old curriculum no longer relevant** to the current curriculum (T-16, November 2017).*

3. Language Barrier

In language learning, the delivery carried out by teachers should be well received by the students. The third challenge experienced by the teachers in rural Indonesian schools was the limitations in the use of Indonesian language. Students in rural Indonesian schools still have difficulty in using Indonesian language, while SM-3T teachers sent to rural Indonesian schools are not equipped with knowledge related to the languages in local areas. It then raised a challenge for these teachers in delivering lessons. This challenge was stated by the T-4 respondent. He also added the need for subject teachers to face this challenge.

*Students still have **difficulty** in speaking Indonesian language so it can be concluded that learning English needs **extra efforts** from the subject teachers (T-4, November 2017).*

The same thing was expressed by the T-2 respondent that in the delivering his lessons in the classroom he must use three languages; local language, Indonesian language and English.

*I have to use **three languages**; local language, Indonesian, and English (T-2, November 2017).*

In addition, English learning also has a close relationship with pronunciation. Students in a rural Indonesian school had difficulty in pronouncing particular vocabulary because it was affected by the accent of their local language. It was conveyed by the T-5 respondent.

*Thirdly, it is **difficult** for them to say father (in fa-de`r) (e) to bebek (Indonesian for duck) (T-5, November 2017).*

The use of local languages in the classroom, recognized by the T-6 respondent as an obstacle in teaching and learning process, because the SM-3T teachers who came to the schools were not equipped with local languages, thus forcing the teachers to learn local languages first to be able to teach English in the classroom.

*The use of **local language** in the classroom sometimes **hampered** the process of English teaching and learning (T-6, November 2017).*

Difficulties in delivering English lessons were also felt by the T-16 respondent. He also found difficulties in delivering English lessons due to the limitation of local language because he was unable to understand the students' local language, while the students were not fluent in Indonesian language.

*Patience is **really needed** because it is a very **difficult** to teach English while the students **do not use Indonesian language properly and correctly** (T-16, November 2017).*

4. Parent Mindset

The fourth challenge is the parent mindset. The parents of the students in the rural schools do not consider formal education important for their children. The absence of parental concern for the formal schools resulting in less motivation they give to their children to be able to study well and earnestly. This was revealed by the T-16 respondent.

*Local communities see that formal education is still **not very important**. They are still **indifferent and do not give much motivation** to their children to study hard (T-16, November 2017).*

This fourth challenge cannot be separated from the points of view of the majority of people in the rural areas on the importance of education. It is also mentioned by the T-8 respondent that the majority of people are less aware of the importance of education so education is not the main concern of the community.

*The majority of people **have not yet realized** the importance of education (T-8, November 2017).*

*Education is **not the main concern** of the community (T-17, November 2017).*

The same problem was also disclosed by the T-15 respondent. He mentioned that the community around his placement was not supportive for the development of their children in school. The absence of support provided by parents at home to encourage children to achieve maximum achievement makes the teacher's duty in rural Indonesian schools become more severe.

*The surrounding community is still **lack** in guiding their sons and daughters in the family environment (T-15, November 2017).*

On the other hand, there are groups of people who have high motivation for sending their children to formal schools, but their awareness to the development of children in schools is so low that this is again the problem of teachers in the rural Indonesian schools.

*The livelihood of communities is farming. The communities are motivated in sending their children to the school but have **less attention** to the development and activities of their children at the school (T-13, November 2017).*

This challenge is inseparable from the mindset of parents who do not see education important. That their children are able to do literacy is enough for them as long as their children can make money because the essence of school for them is to make money in the future.

*Many still think that education is **not important**. Being able to read, to write, and to count is enough. The orientation is money, so the importance is that they can **earn money** although they **do not go to school** (T-1, November 2017).*

5. Inadequacy of Teachers

Inadequacy of teachers in rural Indonesian school is also a challenge for the SM-3T teachers. For example, the existence of a dual role for an individual to become a principal in two schools becomes an obstacle in focusing attention to advance the schools he leads. In addition, teachers' low welfare in rural Indonesian school is also the reason for the shortage of teachers. It is because the number of civil servant teachers in rural Indonesian schools is very small as expressed by the T-1 respondent.

*The principal is still the headmaster of an elementary school who is also the headmaster of the junior high school. There is **no civil servant teacher**; all of the teachers are honorary teachers (T-1, November 2017).*

The low welfare of the teachers because of their status of being honorary teachers impacts on the quality of their teaching in the schools. Teachers just come to school without doing their obligations as teachers, and students are only told to do tasks along with cleaning up the school environment. The fifth challenge facing SM-3T teachers is the inadequacy of teachers before these SM-3T teachers come to the schools. So, they have to revolutionize the circumstances in their placement schools. The T-2 respondent mentioned that the arrival of SM-3T teachers could reduce the lack of teaching clarity conducted by local teachers.

*The principal is **mostly absent** and would come to school only on the national exam days. Teachers still go to school but **do not teach**. The students are asked **only to do the cleaning** in the school every day. However, those have changed a little bit after the SM-3T teachers come to the school (T-2, November 2017).*

Inadequacy of teachers also makes one teacher teach more than one subject, and in many cases, the teachers teach subjects that are not based on their expertise. For example, a physics teacher should teach English or an English teacher should teach mathematics. Such cases have an impact on less maximal lessons given due to the incompatibility of the subjects and the teachers.

*There are only 6 teachers, 2 civil servants (including the principal), 3 school honorary teachers, and 1 local honorary teacher. So, each teacher must teach **multiple subjects**. There are no math and English teachers, so the existing teachers should share the tasks to handle the subjects (T-11, November 2017).*

6. Student Competence

English language learning in Junior High Schools of Rural Indonesian schools is a new thing because of the absence of English subjects at the primary school level. This makes English as something new for students in the rural Indonesian school. This was conveyed by the T-17 respondent as follows.

*English language learning at school is **new for 7th graders** because at the elementary school there is **no English lesson** (T-17, November 2017).*

The absence of basic knowledge of English language in students in rural Indonesian schools makes the students have no basis to follow the lesson which is in accordance with the central curriculum. The sixth challenge teachers have to face in rural Indonesian schools is related to student competence. The student competence in English is still very low, so teachers should teach them from the beginning. This depiction of student competence is stated by the T-10 respondent.

*The children have **no foundation**. They have never learned English at elementary school level so in junior high school's teachers **should teach basic things** and **no longer use the syllabus** (T-10, November 2017).*

The same thing is expressed by the T-12 respondent. He said that the junior high school students in rural Indonesian schools are very low in English. According to the T-11 respondent, it is related to the student ability to understand word class and to memorize vocabulary. The same challenge is also experienced by the T-14 respondent stating that the students in his placement school have difficulty in pronouncing English words and often make mistakes in spelling English words. The T-5 respondent also mentions that the students in his placement schools start learning English from scratch because students get very little English lesson.

*Students **do not have basic English** at all (T-12, November 2017).*

*Many students are **difficult to pronounce** words in English and **makes mistakes** in spelling when writing English (T-14, November 2017).*

*They **do not understand** the word class and **are difficult** to memorize vocabulary (T-11, November 2017).*

*Students really start from scratch in learning English because previously students **hardly learned English** (T-5, Nov. 2017).*

7. Student Mindset

The final challenge facing the teachers in rural Indonesian schools is related to student mindset. The lack of interest of the students in learning English becomes an obstacle for teachers in rural Indonesian schools to deliver lessons easily understood by the students. The T-8 respondent and T-12 respondent mention that in learning English students are not motivated.

*Students **lack interest** (T-8, November 2017).*

*... and they are **not motivated** to learn English (T-12, November 2017).*

The lack of interest from students to learn English is because they have the mindset that English is a tedious and difficult subject. The problems students face such as the difficulty in remembering the list of English words which are different from their local language are also the cause of their lack of interest in learning English. It was conveyed by T-3 respondents as follows.

Students are less enthusiastic in English lesson that they consider a boring subject. It is also difficult because they have to remember a list of English vocabularies which are quite a lot (T-3, November 2017).

In addition to the mindset that English is a tedious and difficult subject, students also consider that English is not an important subject because there is no chance for them to use it outside the school environment as conveyed by the T-6 respondent.

In addition, students have not considered English as an important subject. That there is no chance to use English outside the school may be the reason (T-6, November 2017).

Conclusion

The result of this study reveals that SM-3T teachers who have taught in rural Indonesian schools have experienced several challenges dealing with 1) infrastructure; 2) source of learning; 3) language barrier; 4) parent mindset; 5) inadequacy of teachers; 6) student competence, and 7) student mindset. From those challenges, it can be concluded that education in rural Indonesian schools is still far from adequate as the schools still face many obstacles in teaching and learning process. Besides, rural Indonesian schools still have far to go to be able to fulfill the expectation of national education because they still try to solve problems faced by teachers. However, the teachers who are willing to make advancement in rural Indonesian schools could make a difference in solving the challenges. Moreover, those challenges can be used by the teachers, such as SM-3T teachers, to improve their professionalism as they could experience conditions in rural Indonesian schools which are different from the conditions in urban schools.

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