LEARNING TOGETHER, TEACHING TOO : A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF EFL STUDENTS TEACHER VOLUNTEER'S STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN REMOTE VILLAGE

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Langsa, 06 Juni 2025

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Abstract

Aulia Sinthia Mayang. 2025. Learning Together, Teaching Too : A Narrative Exploration Of Efl Students Teacher Volunteer's Strategies And Challenges In Remote Village *Skripsi.* English Department, Tarbiyah And Teachers Training Faculty, State Institute For Islamic Studies (IAIN) Langsa.

Supervisor (1). Cut Intan Meutia, MA, **(2).** Zahratul Idami, M.Pd

This study investigates the real-life experiences of seven English Education students who served as volunteer teachers in remote villages in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research method with a narrative inquiry design, this research aims to explore both the challenges they encountered and the strategies they employed during their teaching practices. The participant**s** were seven purposively selected student teachers who had volunteered in rural and under-resourced schools. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary instruments, and analyzed thematically to construct participants' narratives. The findings reveal that the participants faced several obstacles, including limited teaching materials, inadequate infrastructure, low student engagement, socio-cultural barriers, and minimal parental support. Despite these challenges, the volunteers demonstrated resilience, creativity, and adaptability in responding to local conditions. They developed their own teaching resources, applied contextual and interactive teaching methods, and established strong emotional connections with both students and the surrounding community.. Overall, the study suggests that teaching in underprivileged areas requires not only pedagogical competence but also emotional intelligence, empathy, and responsiveness to the local context. These insights are expected to contribute to teacher education programs in preparing future educators to serve in marginalized and underserved communities.

Keywords: *Rural teaching, teaching strategies, education challenges*

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Study

Teaching English in remote villages presents its own challenges due to limited resources, infrastructure constraints and lack of trained teachers.[1] One aspect that determines the success of learning is the learning strategy used. Therefore, teachers must be able to choose and use strategies that are in accordance with the learning objectives to be achieved.[2] There are several strategies in English language teaching that can be selected and used by teachers in the learning process to improve students' learning achievement in the four English language skills. Given that English is a foreign language in Indonesia, the learning process certainly requires an appropriate and effective approach.[3] Whatever approach is used, a well-planned teacher should be aware of learning media that can increase student engagement and utilise them in planning and teaching. In addition, a comfortable and supportive classroom climate is needed by teachers to achieve learning objectives.

Furthermore, finding some student development strategies, which include adapting language teaching according to each student's level of English competence, using English in various contexts (writing, repeating, highlighting),

[1] Subhan Zein and others, 'English Language Education in Indonesia: A Review of Research (2011-2019)', *Language Teaching*, 53.4 (2020), 491–523 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000208>.

[2] Idham Syahputra, 'Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris Sebagai Bahasa Asing Dalam Meningkatkan Kemampuan Berbahasa Siswa', Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan, 17 (2014), 127–45.

[3] Farida Samad and Nurlela Tidore, 'Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris Yang Menyenangkan Untuk Anak Usia Dini', *Jurnal Ilmiah Cahaya Paud*, 1.2 (2015), 47–57 <https://doi.org/10.33387/cp.v2i1.226>.

and providing opportunities for students to communicate in the language.[4] The use of appropriate teaching media is basically needed by teachers to increase students' motivation. In addition, teachers in Indonesia need the availability of English literature as it plays an important role in English teaching and learning, especially to enrich students' knowledge in the four skills; writing, reading, speaking and listening.

In addition, constraints on internet access for educators and students in remote areas can affect the learning process, so educators cannot utilise learning media as a tool to increase students' enthusiasm for learning and make the learning process more interactive and meaningful for each individual. Carrying out teaching and learning activities without learning media is possible, but the level of success may not be as effective as when using learning media. There are several obstacles that cause teachers to have difficulty developing and using learning media, including:

1. teachers' limited understanding of how to use learning media appropriately.
2. technical constraints such as unstable internet connection and lack of supporting devices for learning media.
3. teachers' difficulty in connecting the subject matter with the creation of learning media.

Then, in remote areas teachers only rely on books as the only source in the learning process, so the limited digital literacy resources affect the lack of

[4] Roi Boy Jon and others, 'The Challenges Of English Language Teaching In Indonesia The English Language Teaching for Education in Indonesia', IJEAL (International Journal of English and Applied Linguistics), 1.3 (2021), 158–68.

independent learning experiences by students and unsatisfactory learning outcomes. In the midst of technology limitations in remote areas, educators must endeavour to incorporate technology in learning because this has an impact on the limited digital literacy resources obtained by students.

Therefore, as English language education students who volunteer for community service, there are several challenges namely: communication skills despite studying English, students may still face challenges in effectively using the language, especially when communicating with community members who may have varied proficiency levels.[5] Program alignment with local needs designing community service programs that align with local needs and contexts be challenging.[6] Students need to thoroughly understand the challenges and needs faced by the community they serve to design relevant and beneficial programs. resource limitations volunteer students may face limitations in terms of resources, such as funds, facilities, or learning materials. They need to be creative in utilizing available resources most effectively. Adapting to participants' needs understanding and responding to the needs of participants or the community they serve is a crucial challenge. Students need to learn to be sensitive to individuals' needs and diverse backgrounds. Cultural and social challenges especially when working with communities with different cultural or social backgrounds, volunteer students need to overcome cultural and social

[5] H Douglas Brown and Heekyeong Lee, 'Teaching by To Language Pedagogy Monterey Institute of International Studies', 2007.

[6] Addisu Sewbihon Getie, 'Factors Affecting the Attitudes of Students towards Learning English as a Foreign Language', *Cogent Education*, 7.1 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184>.

challenges.[7] This may involve learning about cultural norms, customs, and values prevailing in the community. Classroom management skills if students are involved in educational or teaching programs, they may face challenges in managing classes, motivating participants, and creating a positive and inclusive learning environment. By overcoming these challenges, english language education students maximize their experience as community service volunteers and make meaningful contributions to the communities they serve.

English is seen as a very important global skill, especially in international communication and economic opportunities. The education curriculum in Indonesia explicitly makes English a core subject that must be mastered by students at all levels of education.[8] The expectation is that all students, whether in cities or remote villages, can receive the same quality of English language instruction, supported by adequate facilities, well-trained teachers, and effective teaching methods, such as the use of media to increase student engagement. English education students who carry out community service are expected to make a significant contribution, helping to reduce the education gap, and providing relevant programmes for the local community.

Therefore, based on researcher preliminary study in the form of observation participatory for 15 days in rural areas access to educational resources

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[7] Cushner Kenneth and MahonJennifer, 'Intercultural Competence in Teacher Education', *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, April, 2009, 304–20 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Kenneth-Cushner-2/publication/292017517_Intercultural_competence_in_teacher_education/links/58f759b2a6fdcc70b2b832ad/Intercultural-competence-in-teacher-education.pdf>.

[8] Christi Agustin Malaikosa and Lita Liviani Taopan, 'Teaching English at Junior High School in Indonesian Rural Area : The Implementation of Scientific Approach', *Lensa: Kajian Kebahasaan, Kesusastraan, Dan Budaya*, 10.2 (2020), 206 <https://doi.org/10.26714/lensa.10.2.2020.206-217>.

is very limited. Not all schools have adequate infrastructure, such as internet access, so teachers and students can only use traditional methods that tend to be teacher-centred without much variety in teaching.[9] In remote villages, there is often only one teacher who has to teach several classes at once. The limited number of teachers and facilities makes the learning process less optimal, causing students in rural areas to lag behind in terms of learning quality compared to students in urban areas. The blended learning model, which is expected to be widely implemented, is in fact difficult to implement in villages without internet access. Although there are efforts to implement blended learning offline, resources such as videos and teaching materials are still limited and difficult to access. Students doing community service in villages often face major challenges, such as limited resources and difficulties communicating with local communities who are not all fluent in English. They also have to adjust to the specific needs of the local community, which sometimes differ from the curriculum they learnt on campus.

Due to the discussion above, the researcher is interested in investigating students' challenges when teaching while volunteering in remote villages. Researcher assess that the process is not easy and requires readiness to face difficulties when undergoing service. Finally, this idea inspired researcher to conduct research entitled: ***Learning Together, Teaching Too : A Narrative Exploration Of Efl Students Teacher Volunteer's Strategies And Challenges In Remote Village.***

[9] Rahmi Fadilah and others, 'Teachers' Teaching Reflection: English Teachers' Challenges in Rural Areas of Indonesia', *LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal*, 13.1 (2023), 85 <https://doi.org/10.18592/let.v13i1.8923>.

B. Research Question

Based on the background of the study above, the researcher gives the following research problems :

1. What challenges are the students faced during volunteer in remote area?
2. What Strategies are the student used during volunteer in remote area?

C. Purposes Of Study

1. To know the challenges faced by student teacher volunteers in remote areas.
2. To investigate the strategies employed by student teacher volunteers during their service in remote villages.

D. Significances of Study

Theoretically, the result of the study used as a reference for understanding what are the challenges and strategies faced by the students teacher volunteer. This study provides information about the challenges and strategies faced by students' teacher volunteer.

Practically, this study provides contribution for English students department to realize the importance of serving the community students' knowledge through experience, teach, and motivation for students in volunteer. Beside that, in practically this research beneficial for the volunteers, they can apply how to carry out good work programs when becoming a volunteer in the village.

BAB IV
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Research Findings

In this section, the researcher presented the data obtained over three days through interviews with all participants. Data collection was conducted through teleconferencing using the WhatsApp application, as participants came from various universities, including UIN Sumatera Utara (UINSU), UIN Syuhada, UNSAM, and Langsa. Therefore, in person interviews were only possible for participants from the UNSAM and Langsa areas. One of the main challenges the researcher faced during the data collection process was network or signal constraints. The research results were presented as follows:

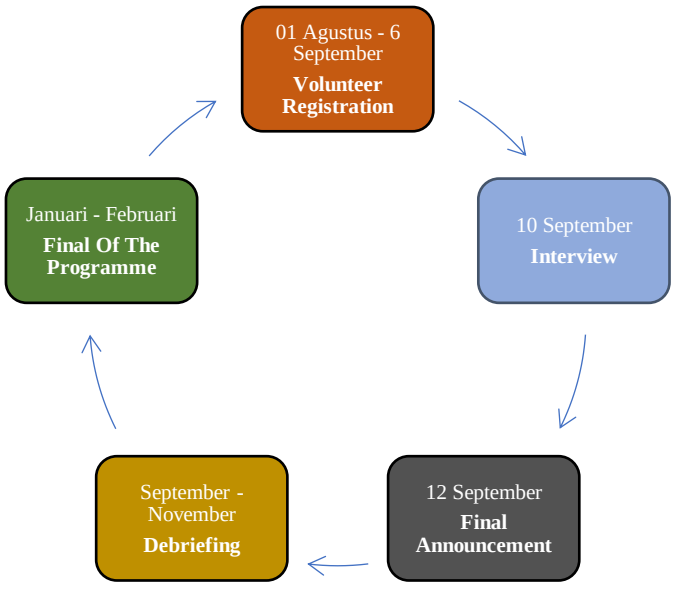

Table 4.1. Timeline of Gerakan Sumut Mengajar

Participants (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Term	School	Teaching practice program duration
Nisa	Female	21	3rd years	School A	2 weeks
April	Female	21	3rd years	School A	2 weeks
Ana	Female	22	3rd years	School A	2 weeks
Evi	Female	21	3rd years	School A	2 weeks
Kia	Female	21	3rd years	School B	2 weeks
Maya	Female	22	3rd years	School B	2 weeks
Dinda	Female	21	3rd years	School B	2 weeks

Table 4.2. Demographic information of participants

Topic	Sample Questions
Challenge in Teaching	1. While teaching in a remote village? 2. Have you faced any communication difficulties with students or the local community? If so, how did you overcome them? 3. Have you ever struggled to adapt to the local social or cultural environment? How did you deal with it?
Teaching Strategies	4. What strategies do you use to teach English to students in this village? 5. How do you adapt your teaching methods to the conditions and needs of students in a remote village? 6. Based on your experience, what teaching techniques or activities are the most effective?

Table 4.3. Interview questions related to Challenges and Strategies for teacher volunteers

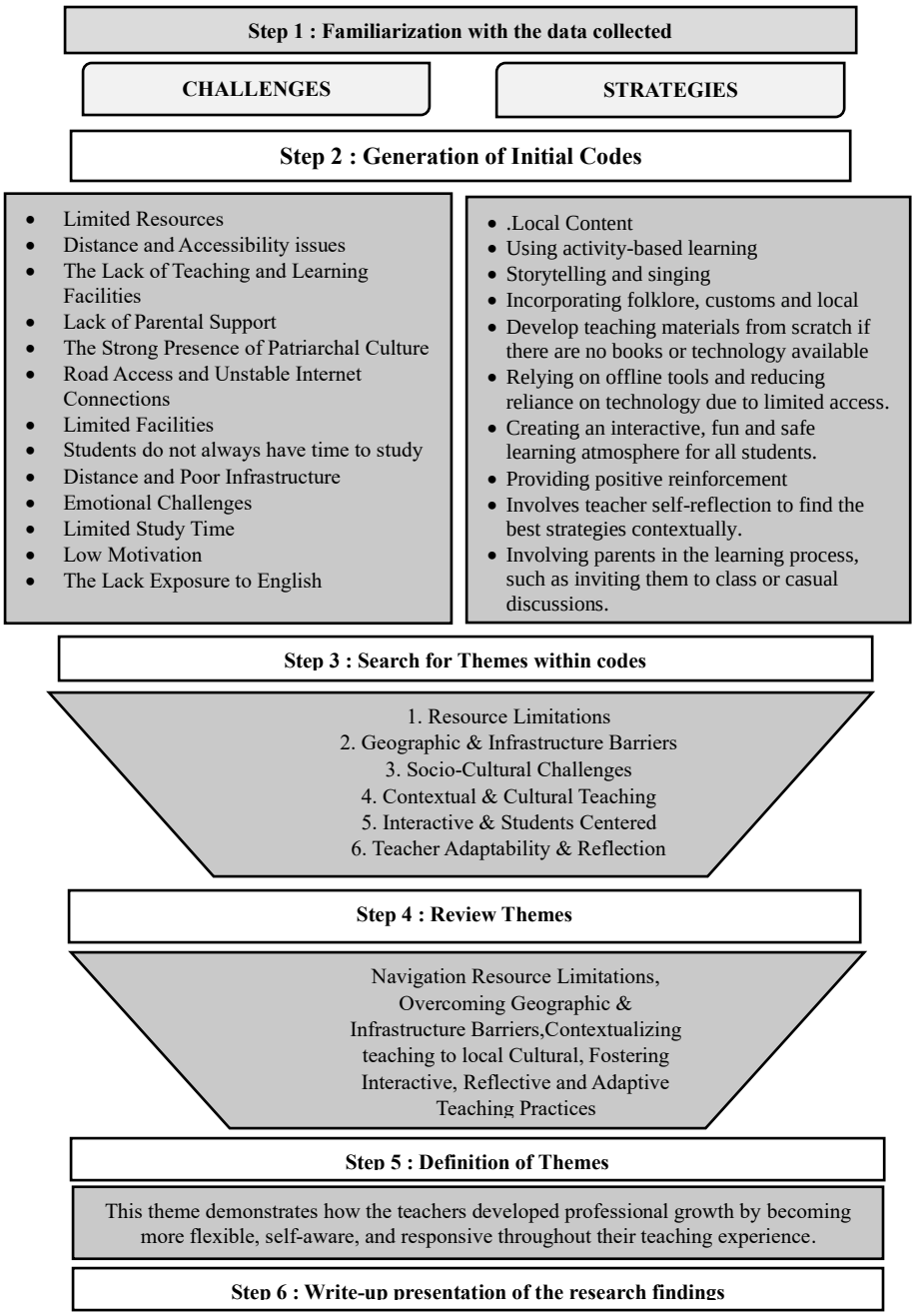

Table 4.4. Adopted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach for developing themes

Teaching in remote areas was not just a process of knowledge transfer, but a challenging journey that tested the resilience, creativity, and social sensitivity of volunteer teachers. Each individual brought a story that reflected the dynamics

of the field. The various limitations faced actually triggered the emergence of innovative strategies, born from sincerity and deep reflection.

April, a student from UIN North Sumatra, began her story by emphasizing that limited facilities were the main obstacle. The absence of textbooks, learning technology, and digital media made the teaching process highly constrained. In addition, difficult to reach geographical conditions, especially during the rainy season, often led to increased student absenteeism and weakened communication between schools and parents. However, instead of giving up, April developed an adaptive and contextualized teaching approach. She implemented active learning methods, such as group discussions and language games, and aligned the learning materials with local culture and daily activities such as markets and farming to make the lessons feel more relevant and relatable to the students.

Kia, a student from the same university also faced another major challenge: the lack of parental support and the strong influence of patriarchal culture. For some community members, English was not considered important, particularly for girls. However, rather than being forceful, she chose to gradually build dialogue, invited parents to witness their children's enthusiasm for learning, and included inspirational female figures in her teaching materials. She also arranged a more flexible schedule and prepared offline teaching materials to anticipate internet connectivity issues.

Meanwhile, Nisa, a student from UIN Syuhada Padang Sidimpuan, faced more extreme challenges. The unavailability of electricity and internet access

forced her to completely transform her teaching approach. She relied on creativity by creating her own learning aids, such as vocabulary cards, and simplifying the materials to suit the students' local context. Many of her students had to assist their parents at home and in the fields, so she adjusted the pace and expectations of learning without compromising the spirit of presence and meaningful impact. Cross cultural communication barriers also posed significant challenges. Maya is volunteers from the same university shared that, despite using Bahasa Indonesia, dialectal differences made some concepts difficult for students to grasp. This experience taught her that communication does not rely solely on language; it must also involve patience, personal connection, and full presence.

Evi, a student from IAIN Langsa, highlighted the decline in student motivation as an emotionally draining challenge. Many students preferred helping their parents over attending school, a condition that often left her feeling helpless. However, she addressed this issue with flexibility by creating engaging learning experiences through songs, games, and a pleasant classroom atmosphere. And Ana, from Samudra University, added that challenges also arose from the psychological condition of the students. Many of them attended class but struggled to focus due to the burden of household responsibilities. Ana responded to this challenge with empathy positioning herself not only as a teacher but also as a friend and listener. Dinda volunteer from IAIN Langsa revealed that students often felt English had no relevance in their daily lives. To address this, she attempted to bring new meaning to the subject through songs, storytelling, and the practical application of English in everyday situations. She also offered simple rewards to enhance students'

motivation and self-confidence. When examined as a whole, it became evident that the various strategies employed by the volunteers were the result of a deep understanding of the socio cultural contexts in which they taught. They not only taught English, but also conveyed meaning and hope through warm relationships and empathetic approaches. Amidst all the limitations, they succeeded in creating vibrant learning environments using simple tools, uplifting songs, interactive games, and inspiring stories.

In conclusion, the challenges were not merely technical hurdles, but also served as opportunities to innovate and demonstrate care. The volunteer teachers emerged not only as educators, but also as agents of change who ignited the spirit of learning through patience, creativity, and consistency amid limited conditions.

B. Discussion

1. **Why Did These Challenges Occur?**

The challenges encountered by volunteer teachers in teaching English in remote villages did not arise in isolation. Rather, they were the result of intertwined social, economic, cultural, and geographical conditions that had developed over time. The narratives shared by participants in this study revealed that these obstacles stem from structural inequalities, limited environmental support, and a lack of collective awareness regarding the importance of foreign language education.

One of the primary contributing factors was the scarcity of educational infrastructure and resources. The absence of textbooks, teaching media, electricity, and internet access severely restricted the delivery of effective instruction. This

aligns with UNESCO's findings, which highlight that rural schools often lag significantly behind urban schools in terms of facilities and learning tools.[65] In such conditions, teachers must exert extra effort to ensure students receive meaningful educational experiences.

In addition, geographical isolation and poor infrastructure profoundly hinder educational processes in remote communities. A recent study examining rural schools in Colombia found that each additional hour of travel time from villages to towns is associated with a roughly 0.34 standard deviation decline in test scores, particularly affecting language outcomes.[66] Similarly, participants in our study described how rugged terrain and seasonal weather disrupted student attendance and strained communication with parents. These real-world challenges support Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework: a child's development is shaped by the environments that surround them. When critical support systems such as transportation, school accessibility, and caregiver engagement are weakened or inaccessible, the educational process suffers accordingly.

Another underlying factor was the influence of social and cultural norms, particularly the persistence of patriarchal beliefs and the lack of parental support. In many rural settings, girls are often excluded from educational opportunities parents deem English unnecessary for daughters while continuing to encourage

[65] UNESCO, 'Non-State Actors in Education', *Global Education Monitoring Report*, 2022, 1–577 <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/non-state_actors>.

[66] Antonio García-Hermoso and others, 'Associations between the Duration of Active Commuting to School and Academic Achievement in Rural Chilean Adolescents', *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine*, 22.1 (2017), 1–7 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12199-017-0628-5>.

sons. Studies from rural Pakistan confirm that patriarchal social structures often prevent girls from continuing their education, even with free schooling available.[67]

Furthermore, students' low motivation and disengagement emerged as emotional and psychological challenges. Many questioned the relevance of English to their daily lives, finding it abstract and disconnected. This reflects findings in rural English language contexts in China, where intrinsic task value is significantly associated with student engagement and language learning success. The Expectancy Value Theory literature in language education also confirms that students are more likely to persist and perform when they perceive tasks as meaningful and attainable.[68]

Compounding this issue was the economic burden placed on students**,** who often had to assist their families with household chores or agricultural work. This dual responsibility left them physically and mentally exhausted, making it difficult to concentrate in class. Vygotsky through his Zone of Proximal Development*,* argues that children's learning is most effective when supported by their environment.[69] In the absence of such support, learning becomes increasingly difficult and emotionally taxing.

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[67] Qazi Waqas Ahmed and others, 'Parents' Involvement in Their Children's Education: Narratives from Rural Pakistan', *Educational Research*, 66.1 (2024), 34–50 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2024.2305821>.

[68] Qi Wang and Mengchen Xue, 'The Implications of Expectancy-Value Theory of Motivation in Language Education', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.November (2022), 1–8 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992372>.

[69] Luis C. Moll, 'Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: Rethinking Its Instructional Implications', *Infancia y Aprendizaje*, 13.51–52 (1990), 157–68 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02103702.1990.10822276>.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the challenges faced by volunteer teachers were not merely technical or logistical, but deeply embedded in systemic, ideological, and emotional contexts. These complex realities demand more than generic teaching strategies they call for empathetic, adaptive, and culturally responsive approaches. The volunteers' ability to reflect, innovate, and engage with the community demonstrates that teaching in remote villages requires both pedagogical skill and social sensitivity. It is through this blend of heart and practice that they navigated the educational struggles and gradually transformed them into meaningful learning journeys.

2. How To Solve The Problem

The volunteers developed innovative strategies that emerged from deep reflection, empathy for students, and a contextual understanding of local culture and conditions. Far from being mere methods, these strategies became the "soul" of a robust and meaningful teaching process.

1. Positive Affirmations and Self Commitment

   Before entering the classroom, they encourage each other with affirmations such as "I can!" or "Let's make a difference!" This positive mindset is reinforced through regular training and discussions among volunteers, so that they not only teach, but also continue to learn and develop.[70]

[70] Ralph Adolph, 'A Case Study of Self-Affirmations in Teacher Education', 20 (2016), 1–23.

2. Handmade Teaching Media

The lack of books and tools encouraged volunteers to make flashcards, cardboard whiteboards and offline modules. April and other participants reported that these media not only simplified the material, but also increased student enthusiasm. This is supported by Ahmad, Aisyah, Prasetyo, & Putranto's research which confirms that handmade flashcards are effective in increasing engagement and vocabulary retention of young students in villages.[71]

3. Activative & Contextual Learning with Projects

Volunteers use language play strategies, songs, mini dramas, and small projects such as making village posters or dramatizing daily activities. The result: students are more active, more creative, and more confident in speaking English. Sintia states that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is proven to increase motivation and encourage collaboration in rural EFL.[72] Similarly, a study in Colombia showed that PjBL strengthened students' self-confidence and feelings of empowerment.

4. Cultural Sensitivity and Gender Inclusion

Faced with patriarchal barriers and low parental support, volunteers build relationships with the community: inviting parents to classes, presenting inspirational female figures, and organizing flexible classes. This is in line with

[71] Kuni Salsabila Ahmad and others, 'Handmade Flashcards for Developing English Comprehension of Rural EFL Young Learners', *Academy of Education Journal*, 15.1 (2024), 176–87 <https://doi.org/10.47200/aoej.v15i1.2127>.

[72] Sintia, 'Teachers' and Students' Perceptions toward the Implementation of Project-Based Learning in EFL Classroom at Rural Schools', 2022.

Wahyuni & Sari, who found that community involvement plays a major role in improving girls' education.[73]

5. Flexible Schedule & Offline Learning Modules

   To overcome road access and bad weather, volunteers adjust the teaching schedule in the evening or weekend and prepare teaching materials that can be used without internet connection. This approach is in line with Sun, Chen & Huang, who state that offline modules and simple ICT are effective to support learning in remote areas.[74]

6. Emotional Presence and Reflection

   Teacher volunteers are also committed to the emotional aspect: they are present as friends, listeners, and motivators. They hear students' stories, understand the burdens they carry, and create a classroom that feels safe and inclusive. The positive emotional connection between teachers and students contributed significantly to students' motivation, participation, and academic success confirming that teachers' emotional presence plays an important role in creating an inclusive and supportive classroom.[75]

The strategies developed by the volunteers are born out of a combination of reflective thinking, creativity in action and genuine care. They serve not only as teachers, but also as designers of locally relevant learning, intercultural liaisons,

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[73] Kadek Natalia Dwiyanti and others, 'Challenges of EFL Teacher in Project-Basaed Learning Contexts in Grade 3 and 4 at Pelangi School Bali', 22.2 (2024), 66–76.

[74] Yuling Sun and others, 'Who Changed the Destiny of Rural Students, and How?: Unpacking ICT-Mediated Remote Education in Rural China', 1.1 (2024) <http://arxiv.org/abs/2401.13799>.

[75] Debora L. Roorda and others, 'The Influence of Affective Teacher-Student Relationships on Students' School Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Approach', *Review of Educational Research*, 81.4 (2011), 493–529 <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793>.

and community mobilizers. This approach demonstrates that education in remote areas can be a meaningful experience when it is humanized, flexible and locally appropriate.

BAB V
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

A. Conclusion

1. The study revealed that student teacher volunteers faced significant challenges during their teaching service in remote villages, including limited teaching resources, inadequate infrastructure, geographical and accessibility barriers, low student engagement, socio-cultural constraints, and minimal parental support. These obstacles reflected not only technical limitations but also deeper social and cultural issues that influenced the teaching and learning process.
2. Despite these challenges, the volunteers employed various adaptive strategies to facilitate learning. They developed handmade teaching materials, applied contextual and interactive teaching methods such as games, songs, and storytelling, and incorporated elements of local culture into lessons. Furthermore, they practiced self-reflection, built strong emotional connections with students, and engaged the local community, demonstrating creativity, resilience, and cultural sensitivity in overcoming the difficulties of rural teaching.

B. Suggestions

1. For Future EFL Volunteers

   It is crucial to prepare not only teaching materials but also to develop intercultural awareness and adaptive teaching strategies. Engaging with the

local community before and during the teaching period can foster better communication and classroom rapport.

2. For Teacher Education Programs

   Institutions should provide more practical training on teaching in diverse and remote contexts. Embedding service-learning components or rural teaching internships could better prepare student teachers for such environments.

3. For Schools and Local Stakeholders

   Support from local authorities and school administrators is essential. Providing even minimal teaching aids and creating a welcoming atmosphere can significantly enhance the effectiveness of volunteer teachers.

4. For Future Researchers

   Further studies can expand on this topic by exploring the long-term impact of such volunteer experiences on both the learners and the teachers. Comparative studies between different rural areas could also provide deeper insight into contextual teaching practices.