

Between Chalk and Soil: Exploring How English Teachers Teach in Rural Farm Schools

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ABSTRACT: In the unique setting of farm schools, English teaching bridges academic learning with the everyday realities of rural life, as teachers adapt lessons to ensure students gain both literacy skills and practical knowledge. This study explored the experiences of English teachers in farm schools, where instruction was shaped by agricultural life and community realities. Guided by Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach, four teachers from three DepEd-accredited farm schools in Central Philippines were purposefully selected. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Findings revealed that teachers faced instructional difficulties and contextual constraints but responded by contextualizing the curriculum, employing pedagogies, implementing remediation, and embracing collaboration. They integrated agricultural and cultural contexts into lessons, applied experiential methods, and developed practices tailored to farm school learners. Despite scarce resources, irregular attendance, and competing academic-agricultural demands, teachers demonstrated resilience and built strong school-community partnerships. The study highlights their role and recommends contextualized training, institutional support, remedial programs, and stronger collaboration.

KEYWORDS: English teachers, experiences, farm schools, agricultural life, contextual constraints

INTRODUCTION

English holds a crucial place in the Philippine education system as it equips learners with essential communication and critical thinking skills needed for higher studies, employment, entrepreneurship, and participation in a globalized world. Within farm schools, teaching English is not only about delivering a core subject under the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum but also about opening a gateway to expanding rural learners' opportunities beyond agricultural work. Farm schools, as mandated by Republic Act No. 10618 or the Rural Farm Schools Act of 2013, provide a distinctive educational model that integrates agricultural training with academic subjects. The law requires the Department of Education (DepEd) to establish at least one public rural farm school in every province, ensuring that students receive accessible education that combines farming, entrepreneurship, environmental responsibility, and general academics. In this context, the teaching of English becomes vital in preparing learners for future roles that demand both technical competence and strong communication skills.

Building upon this legislative foundation, the implementation in Region VI (Western Visayas) has taken concrete form. This mandate has led to the establishment of 31 farm schools located in areas such as Bacolod City, Cadiz City, and Sagay City. These schools are situated near agricultural zones like sugarcane plantations, rice fields, and livestock farms to facilitate experiential learning. The curriculum integrates the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum with a focus on agri-fishery, forestry, farm entrepreneurship, community development, and sustainability, tailored to local agricultural contexts. These initiatives were introduced at a time when the country, especially rural areas in Western Visayas, faced heightened concerns over food insecurity and agricultural decline, reinforcing the urgency of rural education reform, as evidenced by the establishment of farm schools designed to equip learners with practical agricultural skills and promote sustainable farming practices tailored to local needs (Department of Education Region VI, 2021).

In addition to this regional expansion, the growth of farm schools also addresses rural poverty and food insecurity. Many rural communities face economic hardships due to limited access to modern farming technologies and sustainable livelihood opportunities. Farm schools aim to empower youth not only to improve local food production but also to develop agribusiness ventures that can enhance household incomes and contribute to rural economic growth.

Amidst these developments, it is essential to note the continuing importance of English in farm schools. While the primary focus of these schools is agricultural education, core academic subjects like English remain vital. English instruction supports students' post-school pathways by preparing them for broader educational and career opportunities. This includes what are often called "exit pathways" that extend beyond farming to higher education, employment in diverse sectors, and community leadership roles. These

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include “exit” trajectories beyond agriculture such as higher education, technical-vocational work, agri-tourism communication roles, business process outsourcing (BPO), and government service. For instance, experiential farm-based programs have been shown to influence students’ professional identity development and openness to agri-tourism-related careers (Kokličić et al., 2020). In the technical-vocational sector, English proficiency, particularly in communication, has been found to significantly enhance employability, with graduates citing it as the most valuable skill in the workplace (Mariano & Tantoco, 2023). Likewise, English serves as the foundation of the country’s thriving BPO industry, which continues to hire rural and regional youth due to their strong command of the language (IBPAP, 2023). Meanwhile, programs like the ILO’s “Skills for Prosperity” project highlight how English supports TVET graduates in securing government service and public sector roles, particularly in rural communities (ILO, 2023). The subject is not only a requirement of the national curriculum but also a critical tool for communication, entrepreneurship, and accessing global knowledge. The curriculum’s focus on entrepreneurship and community engagement in later years further demands proficiency in English for marketing, proposal writing, and technical comprehension (Republic Act No. 10618, 2013).

Despite the recognized importance of English instruction, limited research has specifically examined the unique experience of teaching English in Philippine farm schools. While rural education literature addresses various aspects of agricultural schooling, the particular role and delivery of English instruction within farm school contexts remain underexplored. Emerging studies suggest that English teaching in rural and farm-based schools is shaped by multiple interconnected factors, including community life, local languages, and educational policies, that influence pedagogical approaches.

Recent research also illustrates instructional innovation in rural English teaching. Salzer (2023) studied rural elementary English teachers in California and revealed how exposure to new instructional modes during remote learning encouraged reflective transformation and pedagogical creativity. These findings highlight the dynamic and context-responsive nature of English teaching in rural, farm-based schools, where instructional approaches are often informed by community values and cultural context.

In the context of the Western Visayas region, linguistic diversity further complicates English instruction. In areas like Sagay City, where Cebuano and Ilonggo (Hiligaynon) are the dominant native languages, the teaching of English takes place in a multilingual environment. Frequent code-switching and language transfer affect how English is acquired and used by students. Cebuano’s simpler verb tense system and Ilonggo’s distinct intonation patterns, for instance, influence learners’ pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension. These challenges demand innovative, adaptive teaching strategies that acknowledge learners’ linguistic backgrounds (Manto & Hermosilla, 2023).

Given all these considerations, a significant research gap remains. Although rural education studies have begun to highlight the need for responsive, localized approaches to instruction, there is still limited research specifically focused on the lived experiences of English teachers in Philippine farm schools. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate how English teachers in farm-based secondary schools interpret and navigate their roles, how they design instruction to suit their environment, and how they make sense of their professional identity in a space rooted in both academic and agricultural aims. By illuminating their lived experiences, this study contributes to the development of grounded, informed support systems for improving English instruction in farm schools, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes in rural, agriculture-oriented communities.

Addressing this gap was important because it amplified the voices of rural English teachers, who had often faced under representation in educational research, and ensured they were recognized. Their experiences provided critical evidence for designing professional development programs, contextualized curricula, and policy support tailored to farm school realities. Ultimately, by bridging this research gap, the study contributed to more equitable, relevant, and sustainable English education in rural communities, preparing students for broader opportunities beyond the farm and reinforcing the transformative role of education in rural development.

Hence, this study explored how English teachers teach in rural farm schools. Specifically, this study aimed to address the following question: What challenges do English teachers encounter in rural farm schools? What strategies do English teachers employ to address these challenges?

METHODOLOGY

Approach to Qualitative Research

This study employed a qualitative research method, specifically a transcendental phenomenological approach as outlined by Moustakas. Phenomenology is a qualitative method that seeks to explore and understand how individuals perceive and experience a particular phenomenon. This study examined the lived experiences of English teachers in farm schools, focusing on their personal, pedagogical, and contextual realities in rural educational settings.

Phenomenology’s flexible design enabled themes to naturally emerge from the data, making it particularly suited for capturing the nuances of teaching in rural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach was the most appropriate for the present study because it allowed for a deep, contextual understanding of the complexities faced by English teachers in farm schools settings that are often overlooked in mainstream educational research.

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Conversation Partners

The conversation partners in this study were four purposefully selected English teachers from DepEd-accredited rural farm schools who met specific inclusion criteria: (a) at least three years of teaching experience in farm-based educational settings, (b) active involvement in implementing contextualized and farm-integrated English instruction, and (c) the ability to clearly articulate their lived experiences in either English or Filipino. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed sufficient professional background and reflective capacity to contribute rich, meaningful insights into the study. The participants brought diverse experiences and complementary roles in language instruction and student development.

The gatekeepers for this study were the school principals of the participating farm schools. They facilitated the researcher's access to the teachers, ensured adherence to ethical guidelines, and coordinated interview arrangements. Their role was crucial in maintaining institutional support, safeguarding participant welfare, and upholding the integrity of the research process.

Research Instrument

The primary data-gathering instrument for this study was the researcher, who played a central role in collecting, interpreting, and making meaning of the participants' lived experiences. To ensure both thorough and unbiased data collection, all participants were interviewed by a hired interviewer on behalf of the researcher, allowing for rich, authentic insights into the teachers' experiences. Although the interviewer conducted the sessions, the researcher remained the main instrument of the study by preparing the guide, overseeing the process, journaling for reflection, and analyzing the data. In line with the qualitative nature of the study, particularly within a phenomenological framework, the researcher served not only as the facilitator of interviews but also as the main tool through which data were filtered, analyzed, and synthesized. The researcher's active engagement, sensitivity, and reflexivity were crucial in drawing out rich, meaningful insights from participants and ensuring that their stories were authentically represented.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with English teachers from selected farm schools in the Central Philippines. This qualitative method enabled participants to freely articulate their lived realities, generating rich and detailed narratives that reflected the unique challenges of teaching in rural, agriculture-based settings. Rooted in phenomenological inquiry, in-depth interviews were deemed appropriate for uncovering the meanings embedded in teachers' lived experiences.

To ensure both rigor and credibility, the researcher engaged a qualified interviewer to conduct the interviews. An external interviewer was intentionally chosen to help minimize researcher bias, establish professional distance, and create a more open atmosphere in which participants felt comfortable sharing their authentic experiences.

The interviews followed a three-phase structure: opening, core conversation, and closing. In the opening phase, the interviewer established rapport, reiterated the purpose of the study, and asked brief background questions related to the participant's teaching experiences. The core conversation centered on guiding questions: *What challenges do English teachers face in rural farm schools? What strategies do English teachers employ to address these challenges?* The interviewer actively listened and used follow-up prompts sparingly to encourage deeper reflection on related themes such as instructional challenges, adaptive strategies, emotional labor, student engagement, and the integration of community and agricultural life. The closing phase allowed participants to share additional insights not previously discussed. At the end of each session, the interviewer expressed gratitude and explained the next steps, including transcript review and opportunities for participants to clarify or expand on their responses. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded.

After each interview, participants were given a modest token of appreciation as a gesture of thanks for their time and willingness to share their experiences. The interviewer personally conducted all sessions, while the researcher ensured accurate transcription and member checking. Participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm accuracy and were given the opportunity to make clarifications or additions.

Following data collection, the researcher applied Moustakas transcendental phenomenological method. The process began with epoche or bracketing, wherein the researcher consciously set aside personal biases to approach the data with openness. Through phenomenological reduction, significant statements or meaning units were identified, followed by imaginative variation to examine the underlying structures shaping participants' experiences. These analyses produced textural descriptions (what participants experienced), structural descriptions (how they experienced it within rural agricultural contexts), and a final synthesis of meanings that conveyed the essence of English teachers' lived experiences in farm schools.

This ethically grounded and methodologically rigorous process honored participants' voices and provided meaningful insights that can inform future educational policies, teacher training, and support systems for educators in rural agricultural settings.

Rigors of Qualitative Research

This study upheld rigorous ethical standards and trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research to ensure the integrity of the research process and the protection of participants' rights and dignity. Prior to data collection, formal approval was secured from the school administration and permission was obtained from the Division Superintendent of the Department of Education (DepEd). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were provided with detailed information about the study's

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purpose, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits. Written informed consent was obtained, and participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

To establish **credibility** and enhance the trustworthiness of the study, member checking was employed by inviting participants to review and validate their interview transcripts.

Dependability was maintained through the systematic use of an in-depth interview protocol and the maintenance of an audit trail that documented each phase of the research process, including data collection procedures, analytical methods, and key methodological decisions. In addition, an external reviewer examined the data and analysis to verify consistency and reduce bias.

Transferability was supported through the provision of rich, thick descriptions of the research setting, participants, and educational environment.

Confirmability was strengthened through ongoing reflexivity and clear documentation. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to critically examine personal assumptions, positionality, and potential biases.

Confidentiality and data security were strictly observed. All interviews were audio-recorded only with the participants' consent and stored securely. Identifying details were anonymized using pseudonyms, and only the researcher had access to the data. After transcription and data verification were completed, the audio recordings were permanently deleted to protect participant privacy.

Finally, participants were treated with empathy, respect, and care throughout the research process. Interview settings were designed to promote openness and comfort, and the interviewer remained attentive to participants' emotional cues during conversations, responding with sensitivity. After the interviews, each participant was given a modest token of appreciation in recognition of their time and contribution. Participants were also offered the option to receive a summary of the study's findings, reinforcing transparency and inclusion in the research process.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure the dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants are protected throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board or ethics committee.

Voluntary Participation and Informed Assent. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Informed assent was obtained after a clear and age-appropriate explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality. Strict confidentiality measures were implemented to protect all collected data. Only authorized personnel accessed identifiable information, and data were securely stored in both physical and digital formats. Participants were assured that their information would not be disclosed outside the research context without their explicit permission.

Transparency. The study upheld transparency by clearly informing participants of its purpose, procedures, and intended use of data during the consent process.

Integrity. The research process reflected integrity through honest data collection and accurate reporting. No form of data fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation was committed.

Justice. The principle of justice guided the equitable treatment of all participants, ensuring fair selection and distribution of the benefits and burdens of the research. Inclusivity was promoted by involving teachers from farm schools, a group often underrepresented in educational research. By prioritizing their voices, the study contributed to fairer representation and resource allocation for rural educators.

Social Value. The study emphasized social value by focusing on the lived experiences of English teachers in farm schools, an area often overlooked in mainstream research. It highlighted the importance of approaching educational research from a rural perspective and aimed to inform policy and support systems responsive to the realities of rural agricultural education.

Vulnerability of Participants. Participants from farm schools often faced vulnerabilities arising from geographic isolation, socio-economic limitations, and restricted access to resources. Ethical sensitivity and protective measures were observed to prevent coercion, harm, or exploitation. Participants were fully informed of their rights, including the option to skip questions or withdraw from the study without consequence.

Potential Risks and Benefits. Potential risks, such as emotional discomfort or breaches of confidentiality, were carefully considered and minimized through safeguards like informed consent and secure data handling. These were balanced against anticipated benefits, including deeper insights into rural education and enhanced teacher support.

Privacy and Confidentiality. All personal identifiers were removed to protect privacy. Extra care was taken in small, close-knit rural communities to avoid deductive disclosure. Pseudonyms inspired by farm crops were assigned to participants (e.g., Cora Corn, Tomas Tomato, Ella Eggplant, and Pia Papaya) to preserve anonymity while maintaining contextual relevance.

Researcher Qualifications. The researcher possessed the necessary qualifications and contextual understanding to conduct the study with ethical rigor. Through cultural competence, reflexivity, and self-assessment, the researcher ensured sensitivity to power dynamics and cultural nuances. The study was further supported by an adviser and a hired interviewer, who held a Master of Education, taught Practical Research, and served as Teacher III, ensuring unbiased data collection and authenticity of responses.

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Adequacy of Facilities. Data collection took place in facilities that were safe, accessible, and contextually appropriate. In rural settings where infrastructure was limited, research methods were adapted to minimize disruption to participants' routines.

Community Involvement. Engagement with the local community was integral to the study. Stakeholders were involved throughout the research process, from planning to dissemination, which enhanced the study's relevance, promoted shared ownership of findings, and supported sustainable benefits for the farm school community.

Data Explication

This study was analyzed using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences of the participants. This approach allowed the researcher to uncover the essence of teachers' experiences, providing rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The method has been effectively employed in previous studies, such as Critchlow's (2023) exploration of counseling students' experiences with instructor humor and Meihami and Rashidi's (2022) investigation into EFL teacher educators' professional identity formation, demonstrating its applicability in capturing the depth and complexity of lived experiences.

The process of transcendental phenomenological analysis began with epoche or bracketing, wherein the researcher intentionally set aside personal biases, assumptions, and preconceived notions about the phenomenon to approach the data with openness. This was followed by phenomenological reduction or horizontalization, during which the researcher identified all statements related to the experience and initially treated each statement as equally important, before removing those that were repetitive, unclear, or irrelevant. These significant statements were then organized into clusters of meaning that captured the essential elements and structures of the experience.

From these clusters, a textural description was developed to illustrate what the participants experienced, offering a vivid account of their realities as English teachers in farm schools. Alongside this, a structural description was constructed to explain how these experiences occurred, including the surrounding conditions and contexts that shaped them. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to produce a composite essence, representing the shared meaning of the lived experiences across all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of English teachers in rural farm schools in Central Philippines, examining how agricultural, socio-cultural, and resource-related factors influenced their professional practices. Employing a transcendental phenomenological approach, the research analyzed the challenges teachers encountered and the strategies they employed to navigate these circumstances. The findings were organized into major themes, providing a structured understanding of the participants' experiences and adaptive practices.

The first two themes, Instructional Challenges and Contextual Constraints, revealed that teachers struggled with students' low proficiency, poor comprehension, poor study habits, irregular attendance, and retention issues, alongside external challenges such as scarce resources, unstable electricity, multi-grade classes, and demanding workloads. These conditions emphasized the gap between curriculum expectations and learners' readiness in farm school contexts. The next two themes, Contextualizing Curriculum and Employing Pedagogies, showed how teachers made lessons relevant to agricultural and community life by creating localized materials and using creative, student-centered methods such as storytelling, outdoor activities, scaffolding, and peer support to sustain engagement.

The final two themes, Implementing Remediation and Embracing Collaboration, highlighted how teachers addressed learning gaps through tutorials, peer assistance, simplified reviews, and vernacular bridging, while also relying on teamwork with colleagues, student leaders, parents, and communities, as well as limited technological tools, to sustain instruction. Overall, the findings showed that teachers' experiences were marked by resilience, adaptability, and creativity. Despite persistent challenges, they transformed limitations into opportunities, ensuring that English instruction remained meaningful, inclusive, and empowering for rural learner.

A Simulacrum of the Challenges and Strategies Employed by English Teachers in Rural Farm Schools



CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of English teachers in a rural farm school, showing how agricultural realities, socio-cultural contexts, and limited resources shape their professional practices. Teachers address these challenges through contextualized lessons, adaptive pedagogies, targeted remediation, and collaboration, demonstrating resilience, creativity, and commitment to student-centered learning. Despite constraints such as low student proficiency, irregular attendance, and scarce resources, they sustain meaningful and engaging English instruction.

The findings highlight that relevance, adaptability, collaboration, and even modest technological tools are key to improving learning outcomes in rural contexts. By grounding instruction in local realities and fostering reflective, innovative teaching, teachers empower learners and bridge gaps in literacy and comprehension. Overall, the study confirms that equitable and effective English education is achievable in rural farm schools when pedagogy is context-sensitive, resourceful, and responsive, providing valuable insights for future practice and research.

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