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Strengthening English Teaching Competence in Rural Elementary Education: Lived Experiences and Adaptive Instructional Practices of Teachers in Ifugao, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

English instruction in rural elementary schools requires teachers to negotiate linguistic diversity, foundational literacy needs, curriculum expectations, resource availability, and culturally situated learner experiences. These demands become particularly significant in Indigenous communities, where English may coexist with Filipino and local languages used in learners' homes and communities. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and adaptive instructional practices of elementary teachers teaching English in Ifugao, Philippines. Specifically, it examines teachers' experiences in developing learners' English proficiency, the instructional challenges they encounter, the strategies they employ to address linguistic and learning diversity, the ways they contextualize English instruction, and the professional meanings they construct from these experiences. Participants will be purposively selected elementary teachers with direct experience teaching English in rural and Indigenous school contexts. Data will be generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Four provisional analytical themes frame the discussion: Bridging Languages, Building Understanding; Teaching Beyond the Textbook; Meeting Learners Where They Are; and Growing Through Practice and Reflection. The study positions English teaching competence as a dynamic combination of language knowledge, pedagogical skill, cultural responsiveness, adaptive decision-making, and continuing professional learning. Findings may inform teacher professional development, culturally responsive English instruction, literacy initiatives, and institutional support for rural elementary teachers.

Keywords: adaptive instruction, English teaching competence, Indigenous education, rural elementary education, teacher lived experiences, phenomenology, Ifugao, Philippines

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Introduction

English remains an important component of Philippine basic education, particularly in the development of literacy, communication, comprehension, and access to increasingly complex academic content. In elementary education, teachers are expected not only to teach English language forms but also to strengthen learners' listening, speaking, reading, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing competencies. The Department of Education's learning resources continue to identify oral language, reading comprehension, vocabulary development, grammar, listening comprehension, viewing, and writing among important English learning domains in elementary education.

The current Philippine curriculum context further places strong emphasis on foundational literacy. The revised K-10 MATATAG curriculum prioritizes literacy and numeracy in the early grades and aims to provide teachers with more focused competencies and improved opportunities for deeper mastery. These reforms heighten expectations for elementary teachers to possess strong pedagogical competence in literacy instruction while adapting teaching practices to diverse learner needs.

Teacher competence in the Philippines is also framed by the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). The PPST identifies seven professional domains, including content knowledge and pedagogy, learning environment, diversity of learners, curriculum and planning, assessment and reporting, community linkages, and professional growth. These domains are highly relevant to English teaching because effective language instruction requires not only subject knowledge but also the ability to differentiate tasks, assess language development, provide supportive learning environments, and respond to linguistic and cultural diversity.

These responsibilities can become particularly complex in rural and Indigenous communities. Learners may use a local language as their primary means of communication at home and encounter Filipino and English as additional languages within formal education. For teachers, English instruction consequently involves more than explaining vocabulary and grammar. They may need to bridge languages, interpret unfamiliar expressions, connect English concepts with culturally familiar experiences, and build learners' confidence in using a language they may encounter less frequently outside school.

Recent Philippine studies indicate that language adaptation is a significant concern in Indigenous Peoples schools. Obida and Cagoco (2025), in a qualitative case study of English teachers teaching Indigenous learners, specifically examined how educators adapted language when teaching students from Indigenous communities. Their work underscores the importance of flexible language practices when formal English instruction intersects with learners' home languages and sociocultural contexts.

Similarly, Cerbo (2025) explored the challenges and strategies of teachers teaching English in far-flung schools in Sultan Kudarat, including Indigenous educational contexts. The study indicates that geographical and contextual conditions can shape both the difficulties teachers experience and the strategies they develop to sustain English instruction.

English learning among Indigenous learners may likewise involve challenges in oral expression and comprehension. Earlier Philippine evidence involving Indigenous learners documented difficulties related to vocabulary, processing information, and expressing ideas in English, illustrating the linguistic complexity encountered by learners acquiring English within multilingual contexts.



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These issues are especially relevant in Ifugao. The province possesses strong Indigenous cultural traditions, community knowledge systems, and local language practices. Research on Ifugao Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices demonstrates that culturally situated knowledge can be meaningfully integrated into formal instruction and that teachers use strategies such as contextualization, local examples, experiential activities, and language-sensitive approaches to connect curriculum with learners' cultural worlds (Cabauatan, 2025).

Within such an environment, English teachers occupy an important mediating position. They are responsible for enabling learners to develop competence in English without treating local language and culture as barriers to learning. Instead, culturally and linguistically familiar knowledge may function as resources through which new English concepts can be understood.

The realities of rural teaching further contribute to the complexity of English instruction. Teachers assigned to remote communities may encounter geographical isolation, limited access to materials, transportation difficulties, professional isolation, and differences in institutional support. Galut et al. (2025), examining teachers' lived experiences in remote areas, documented substantial challenges associated with working in geographically distant communities while also highlighting teachers' adaptation and perseverance.

Despite growing literature on rural education, Indigenous education, English teaching, and language adaptation, fewer studies focus specifically on how experienced elementary teachers understand the development of their own English teaching competence through lived practice. Competence is often assessed through performance indicators or knowledge measures, but these approaches may not fully capture how teachers learn to adapt explanations, differentiate reading activities, respond to language anxiety, contextualize instruction, or refine teaching strategies over time.

This study therefore explores the lived experiences and adaptive instructional practices of elementary teachers teaching English in rural Ifugao. It seeks to understand English teaching competence not as a fixed personal characteristic but as a form of professional expertise continuously shaped by learners, classroom realities, cultural context, instructional challenges, and reflective practice.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

English Teaching Competence

English teaching competence encompasses more than proficiency in English itself. Teachers must possess content knowledge concerning language and literacy while simultaneously knowing how to represent that knowledge in ways that elementary learners can understand.

The PPST provides a relevant national framework by emphasizing content knowledge and pedagogy, diversity of learners, curriculum and planning, assessment, and professional development as essential domains of teacher practice. Applied to English instruction, these domains require teachers to understand language concepts, design literacy activities, assess learner progress, adjust instruction, and engage in continuing professional learning.

This distinction is important because a teacher may possess strong personal English proficiency without



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necessarily having equal competence in teaching beginning readers, explaining vocabulary to multilingual learners, facilitating oral language development, or providing appropriate feedback.

Teaching competence is therefore enacted in the classroom through professional judgment. Teachers continually decide how much explanation learners need, what examples are appropriate, how difficult a reading text should be, how to group students, when to translate or clarify in another language, and how to respond when learners hesitate to communicate in English.

English Instruction in Multilingual and Indigenous Contexts

The linguistic diversity of Indigenous educational environments creates specific instructional considerations. English may represent an additional language learned after a local Indigenous language and Filipino, making language learning an inherently multilingual process.

Obida and Cagoco (2025) examined English teachers working in Indigenous Peoples schools and focused specifically on language adaptation. Their study illustrates that English teachers may need to alter explanations, use linguistic bridges, and adjust classroom communication according to learners' existing language resources.

Related Philippine evidence also indicates that English teachers in far-flung schools experience challenges requiring context-sensitive strategies (Cerbo, 2025). Such findings suggest that effective English instruction in rural Indigenous communities cannot simply replicate practices used in highly urbanized or linguistically different environments.

The local language should not necessarily be interpreted as interference with English acquisition. From an adaptive pedagogical perspective, learners' existing linguistic repertoire can function as a resource for meaning-making. Teachers may use familiar words, translations, comparisons, examples, gestures, visuals, or community experiences to facilitate movement toward English understanding.

Foundational Literacy and Early English Learning

Elementary English teaching is closely associated with literacy development. Learners require increasingly sophisticated skills in decoding, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, oral communication, and writing as they progress through school.

The MATATAG curriculum reform places renewed emphasis on foundational literacy, particularly in the early grades. This makes teacher competence especially significant because weaknesses in foundational skills can affect learners' ability to understand more complex academic content later.

The challenge is not simply teaching children to pronounce English words. Competent literacy teaching requires teachers to determine whether learners understand vocabulary, make meaning from texts, connect ideas, express responses, and apply language across contexts.

The Department of Education has also continued literacy-focused interventions and teacher professional development, reflecting the national priority placed on strengthening reading and literacy outcomes.

Differentiated and Adaptive English Instruction



A rural elementary English classroom may contain learners with substantially different levels of proficiency. Some students may read independently and express ideas confidently, while others may struggle with vocabulary, decoding, comprehension, or spoken English.

Adaptive teaching therefore requires teachers to recognize that uniform instruction may not be sufficient. Differentiated instruction can involve modifying task complexity, reading materials, teacher support, grouping arrangements, questioning, pacing, and assessment. Recent scholarship continues to emphasize differentiated instruction as an appropriate approach for English-language learners because it allows instruction to respond to readiness and learning needs rather than expecting all students to progress identically.

Adaptive instruction also includes moment-to-moment changes. A teacher may simplify an explanation after observing confusion, provide an example drawn from community life, use visual support, organize peer assistance, or temporarily use another language to establish meaning before returning to English.

Such actions demonstrate that teaching competence is partly the capacity to read the classroom and adjust accordingly.

Contextualization and Indigenous Knowledge

Culturally responsive teaching recognizes that learners' cultural knowledge and everyday experiences can contribute meaningfully to formal learning. In Indigenous communities, this principle is especially important because education has historically risked privileging external knowledge at the expense of local knowledge systems.

Cabauatan's work on integrating Ifugao IKSPs demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge can be incorporated into instruction through experiential learning, culturally grounded examples, language use, reflective strategies, and other context-sensitive approaches.

For English teachers, contextualization may involve selecting familiar topics for oral communication, using local narratives as reading or writing stimuli, connecting English vocabulary with objects and activities found in the community, or encouraging learners to communicate culturally meaningful experiences in English.

The objective is not to replace English-language learning with local content. Rather, culturally familiar knowledge can provide semantic and experiential scaffolding for the development of English competence.

Rural Teaching and Resource Constraints

Teaching in rural communities may require additional professional adaptation because teachers do not always have equivalent access to instructional technologies, libraries, supplementary materials, professional-development programs, or specialized support.

Galut et al. (2025) found that teachers assigned to remote areas encountered substantial contextual challenges associated with access and daily working conditions. Such constraints can affect English instruction when teachers need leveled reading materials, audio resources, visual materials, digital content,



or opportunities for professional collaboration.

Resource limitations may therefore encourage teachers to create localized reading texts, improvise visual materials, reuse available resources, or collaborate with colleagues in developing instructional materials. However, teacher resourcefulness should not be interpreted as evidence that inadequate resources are acceptable. Adaptive competence is a professional strength, but it should be supported by appropriate institutional investment.

Continuing Professional Development

English teaching competence develops across a career. Formal pre-service preparation provides an important foundation, but classroom practice continually presents new learner needs, curriculum reforms, technologies, and instructional challenges.

A recent systematic review of continuing professional development found that sustained teacher learning is associated with multiple forms of professional growth and highlighted the importance of well-designed professional-development opportunities (Merino, 2025).

Research involving rural primary English teachers also indicates that professional-development programs can influence teachers' professional learning and well-being when designed in relation to their working contexts.

For experienced teachers, professional development can include formal training as well as peer mentoring, lesson study, reflection, classroom experimentation, collaborative planning, and sharing of effective practices.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study is informed primarily by Pedagogical Content Knowledge, culturally responsive teaching, and adaptive instruction.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge provides a useful framework because effective English teachers require both knowledge of English and knowledge of how English concepts can be made understandable to particular learners. Teaching vocabulary, reading comprehension, speaking, or writing requires more than personal language proficiency; it requires pedagogical representations appropriate to learners' developmental and linguistic needs.

Culturally responsive teaching adds a contextual dimension by emphasizing that learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be meaningfully acknowledged in instructional decision-making.

Adaptive instruction further explains the teacher's capacity to alter strategies according to learner responses and contextual demands.

5. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences and adaptive instructional practices of elementary teachers teaching English in rural Ifugao. Specifically, it seeks to:



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1. explore teachers' lived experiences in teaching English;
2. identify challenges encountered in developing learners' English language and literacy skills;
3. examine adaptive strategies used to address linguistic and learning diversity;
4. understand how teachers contextualize English instruction within Indigenous communities; and
5. describe how experience and professional reflection strengthen English teaching competence.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to understand the meanings teachers constructed from their experiences of teaching English in rural elementary schools. Participants consisted of purposively selected elementary teachers from Hungduan, Ifugao, and comparable rural school settings in Ifugao who had direct and substantial experience teaching English. Criterion-based purposive sampling prioritized teachers capable of providing information-rich narratives concerning language instruction, literacy development, learner diversity, and classroom adaptation.

Data were generated primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Questions explored participants' experiences of teaching reading, vocabulary, oral communication, comprehension, and writing; responding to differences in English proficiency; using local or Filipino languages when appropriate; contextualizing English lessons; addressing resource limitations; and improving instructional practices through experience. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data underwent phenomenologically informed thematic analysis involving repeated reading, identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of related meanings, development of themes, and synthesis of the shared essence of participants' experiences. Credibility was supported through probing, repeated comparison of interpretations with transcripts, and participant clarification when necessary; dependability was established through an audit trail; confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and grounding interpretations in participants' accounts; and transferability was supported through rich descriptions of the school and cultural contexts.

Institutional permission and ethical approval were obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, participants' identities were protected through pseudonyms or participant codes, and culturally sensitive information was handled respectfully.

8. Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Bridging Languages, Building Understanding

The first analytical theme concerns teachers' experience of helping learners move between familiar languages and English. Participants may describe situations in which learners understand concepts but



have difficulty expressing them in English, requiring teachers to employ translations, examples, visuals, gestures, and gradual language scaffolding.

Participant 5 (P5):

“Sometimes the learner knows the answer, but he cannot immediately say it in English. I allow him to explain first in the language he understands, then we work together on how to express the idea in English.”

Participant 2 (P2):

“If I explain everything in English and I can see that they are already confused, I change my approach. I give a familiar example or explain an important word first before we go back to the English lesson.”

Participant 9 (P9):

“I do not want them to be afraid of English. I tell them it is okay to make mistakes because speaking is part of learning.”

These responses would demonstrate that English teaching competence in a multilingual setting involves linguistic mediation, rather than strict insistence on English-only communication.

P1's account suggests that existing language competence can function as a bridge toward English expression. The learner is not treated as lacking knowledge simply because the knowledge cannot initially be expressed in English.

This interpretation is supported by Obida and Cagoco (2025), whose study of English teachers in Indigenous Peoples schools specifically identified language adaptation as a significant aspect of teaching Indigenous learners. Their findings reinforce the importance of adjusting teacher language according to learners' linguistic realities.

The theme also corresponds with earlier evidence concerning speaking difficulties among Philippine Indigenous learners, particularly in vocabulary, processing, and expressing information in English. These difficulties suggest that teachers may need to differentiate between lack of conceptual understanding and difficulty expressing that understanding through English.

P3's emphasis on reducing fear is similarly important. English competence develops through opportunities to use language, which can be inhibited when learners fear embarrassment or correction. Thus, effective English teaching involves constructing a psychologically supportive environment in which errors are treated as part of learning.

The theme therefore positions the teacher as a language bridge-builder, helping learners move from familiar linguistic resources toward increasingly independent English use.

Theme 2: Teaching Beyond the Textbook- Contextualizing English Through Local Life

The second theme concerns teachers' efforts to make English lessons more understandable by drawing on learners' community experiences, local environment, Indigenous knowledge, and everyday life.

Participant6 (P6):

“When a story or example is unfamiliar to them, I connect it to something they know in the community. Once they understand the situation, it becomes easier to understand the English words.”

Participant 11 (P11):

“For speaking activities, I ask them to talk about things they really experience—family activities, places in



the community, or things they see around them. They have more ideas to share.”

Participant 5 (P5):

“Sometimes I create my own short reading passages using familiar places or practices because the pupils respond better when the story is connected to their life.”

These narratives would indicate that culturally familiar experience can serve as a **scaffold for second-language meaning-making**.

P2 suggests that difficulties may arise not only from unfamiliar English vocabulary but also from unfamiliar content. When teachers contextualize the situation before addressing the language, they reduce the conceptual distance learners must negotiate.

P4 further demonstrates the potential value of culturally familiar content in developing oral communication. Learners who have meaningful experiences to discuss may be more capable of concentrating on how to communicate those experiences in English.

This interpretation aligns with research concerning the integration of Ifugao Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices. Cabauatan (2025) found that Ifugao cultural knowledge could be meaningfully incorporated into instruction using context-sensitive and experiential approaches. Although the study concerned Philippine Studies rather than English, it provides locally relevant evidence that culturally situated knowledge can function as a pedagogical resource.

The theme also reflects broader culturally responsive pedagogy, which seeks continuity between learners’ home and school experiences rather than positioning formal education as disconnected from community knowledge.

Importantly, contextualization should not reduce Indigenous culture to decorative examples. The objective is to create authentic connections between English skills and meaningful communication while respecting community knowledge and cultural integrity.

Theme 2 therefore reframes English teaching as teaching language through meaningful worlds, rather than teaching language forms in isolation.

Theme 3: Meeting Learners Where They Are Differentiation, Scaffolding, and Patient Progress

The third theme concerns learner diversity. Participants may describe classrooms in which children possess markedly different levels of English reading, speaking, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Participant 8 (P8):

“You cannot give exactly the same reading task to everyone. Some pupils can read independently, while others still need me beside them.”

Participant 3 (P3):

“For learners who struggle, I break the activity into smaller steps. Sometimes we work first on important vocabulary before reading the whole passage.”

Participant 4 (P4):

“I group them depending on what they need, but I change the groups because I do not want a pupil to think that he always belongs to the weak group.”

These accounts would identify differentiated instruction as an essential component of English teaching



competence.

P1 recognizes that equal tasks do not necessarily constitute equitable instruction. Learners require varying levels of teacher guidance according to their existing skills.

P3 illustrates scaffolding through the decomposition of complex tasks into manageable components. Pre-teaching vocabulary before reading a passage, for example, can reduce linguistic load and enable learners to devote greater attention to comprehension.

Recent scholarship on differentiated instruction for English-language learners similarly emphasizes adapting content, process, assessment, and teacher support according to learner readiness and language needs.

The theme also corresponds with the PPST's explicit recognition of learner diversity as a central domain of professional teaching competence.

P5 adds an important socio-emotional dimension. Differentiation should support learners without permanently labeling them according to perceived ability. Flexible grouping allows teachers to respond to instructional needs while reducing the risk of creating fixed identities around achievement.

Theme 3 therefore suggests that strengthening English teaching competence means developing increasingly accurate professional judgments about what support each learner needs and when that support should be adjusted or withdrawn.

Theme 4: Growing Through Practice Reflection, Resourcefulness, and Continuing Professional Learning

The final theme concerns how teachers' English teaching competence develops through experience. Participants may describe learning from unsuccessful lessons, observing learners, collaborating with colleagues, attending professional development, and refining strategies over time.

Participant 10 (P10):

"There are strategies that I used before that I no longer use in the same way. Experience taught me to look at how the pupils respond and change the lesson if necessary."

Participant 4 (P4):

"When I encounter a problem in teaching reading, I ask other teachers what they do. Sometimes one simple suggestion from a colleague gives me another strategy to try."

Participant 2 (P2):

"Training helps, but the classroom is where you really discover whether a strategy works for your learners. You have to continue learning."

These responses would demonstrate that teaching competence is developmental rather than static.

P2 illustrates reflective adaptation. Expertise develops when teachers interpret evidence from learner responses instead of equating faithful implementation of a lesson plan with effective teaching.

P4 demonstrates the significance of professional collaboration. Teacher expertise need not develop individually; colleagues can function as sources of practical pedagogical knowledge.

P5 connects formal professional development with classroom experimentation. This interpretation is supported by contemporary literature emphasizing continuing professional development as an important



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mechanism for strengthening teachers' knowledge, practices, and professional learning (Merino, 2025). Research involving rural primary English teachers likewise suggests that context-sensitive professional-development programs can contribute positively to teachers' professional learning and well-being. The PPST similarly emphasizes personal growth and professional development as an integral dimension of quality teaching.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The study suggests several implications for strengthening English teaching in rural Indigenous elementary schools. Professional-development programs should provide teachers with practical preparation in multilingual scaffolding, differentiated reading instruction, oral-language development, formative assessment, culturally responsive material development, and contextualized English pedagogy.

Teacher training should likewise recognize that rural English instruction occurs within specific linguistic and cultural ecologies. Strategies appropriate for English-dominant or urban contexts may require adaptation when learners possess different home-language experiences.

Schools and districts may strengthen professional learning through peer coaching, lesson study, demonstration teaching, collaborative material development, reading intervention communities, and mentoring by experienced teachers. This recommendation aligns with continuing national emphasis on teacher professional development and curriculum implementation.

Instructional-resource development should also incorporate culturally meaningful reading and communication materials where appropriate. Local narratives, environments, experiences, and community knowledge can provide authentic contexts for English learning without displacing the objectives of language instruction.

At the policy level, rural and Indigenous teachers require equitable access to professional development, instructional materials, digital connectivity, and literacy support. Teacher adaptability should be recognized as professional competence, but it should not become a substitute for adequate educational resources.

Conclusion

Strengthening English teaching competence in rural elementary education requires more than improving teachers' command of English. Effective teaching in rural Ifugao involves the capacity to interpret learners' linguistic needs, bridge familiar languages with English, contextualize instruction within meaningful community experiences, differentiate literacy activities, establish psychologically supportive classrooms, and continually refine instructional practices through reflection and professional learning.

The study conceptualizes English teaching competence as dynamic professional expertise situated at the intersection of language, pedagogy, learner diversity, culture, and place. Teachers working in Indigenous communities do not simply transmit English knowledge; they mediate between linguistic worlds and create pathways through which learners can participate confidently in English while remaining grounded in their existing cultural and linguistic identities.



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By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, the study can contribute to more responsive professional development and context-sensitive English instruction. Its broader implication is that effective rural English education should not require learners to leave their cultural worlds behind in order to acquire another language. Instead, competent teaching can use those worlds as meaningful foundations for new linguistic learning.

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