

Teaching English in a Rural School: How the Pandemic Affects Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Muthia Shahnaz*, Isti Siti Saleha Gandana

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

*Corresponding author. Email: muthiashahnaz@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

Indonesian rural teachers are known to have particular obstacles in teaching English. The obstacles are lack of learning sources, inadequate facilities, language barriers, demotivated students, unsupportive parents, and damaged road access. These obstacles seem to have been exacerbated by the current pandemic. A new regulation during the pandemic has demanded schools to be held online. However, a rural school cannot follow the regulation since rural students cannot afford any electronic devices to follow the e-learning, and there isn't any signal in the students' residence. In line with this, rural teachers who play a vital role in classrooms should possess positive values and views to survive in teaching the rural students. Therefore, investigating teachers' beliefs is considered important since teachers' beliefs are influential to their practices. This study used a case study design by interviewing two English teachers in a rural Jambi school. The interviews were obtained by some stages regarding the needs of gaining their true insights. Offline classroom observations were also conducted to investigate how their beliefs reflected their practices. This study pointed two components: 1) the teachers' beliefs about teaching English in the rural school, and 2) the impact of the worldwide pandemic on the teachers' beliefs and practices. This study indicated that the teachers' beliefs which are derived from their teaching experiences are reflected in their practices. Furthermore, the worldwide pandemic which generates new regulations in teaching has modified the teachers' views of teaching.

Keywords: *Teachers' beliefs, teachers' practices, rural school*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in Indonesian rural schools will always be challenging. Issues such as language barriers by rural dialects, lack of facilities, inadequate infrastructures, demotivated students, and parents' sceptical mind-sets of English are the challenges frequently associated with teaching English in rural schools (Febriana, Nurkamto, Rochsantiningsih, & Muhtia, 2018). These issues appear to make rural schools inferior to urban schools (Lackin & Gasperini, 2004; Medina & Arcilla, 2013). Hence, rural schools have lost many teachers since most teachers prefer to work in urban schools that provide more conveniences (Wang, 2006). The current pandemic seems to have further complicated the problems encountered by these rural schools. COVID-19 that occurred since the last March 2020 has shaken the world and interfered with all aspects of human life, including the teaching and learning processes in Indonesian rural schools. Before the pandemic, rural schools have faced their own obstacles and limitations. Then, it becomes further

complicated due to the pandemic. Teaching English in Indonesian rural schools, therefore, has become even more challenging for teachers.

For this reason, it is important to attend to their voices and aspirations to make them feel heard. As teachers' beliefs are inextricably intertwined with teachers' practices (Pajares, 1992; Xu, 2012), it is of particular importance that these aspects be highlighted in the conversation. In relation to this, Kuzborska (2011) pointed out that teachers make classroom decisions based on their beliefs about language teaching and learning. In view of this, the study of teachers' beliefs can thus provide useful insights into many aspects of education, and, as Pajares (1992) believes, the awareness of teachers' beliefs by the teachers themselves can help improve their teaching practices. Given the importance of this topic, this paper, therefore, aims to inquire into the beliefs and practices of two Indonesian teachers teaching English in a rural school in the western part of Indonesia.

The chosen school was a Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in a rural area of Jambi, a province in Sumatera. The school was chosen because it owns characteristics of a rural school and has faced further difficulties due to the pandemic which forced them to still run offline learning. By those issues, it would be meaningful to investigate the two teachers' beliefs of ELT considering the condition of the school. What the English teachers' beliefs about ELT in rural schools are, and how the pandemic has affected their beliefs and practices are the focus of this study.

1.1. The Notion of Teachers' Beliefs

Belief is a multifaceted terminology that has often been used interchangeably with attitudes, conceptions, judgment, values, perceptions, personal theories, and opinions (Pajares, 1992). Teachers' beliefs are closely related to their values, their views of the world, and their understanding of their places, indeed teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs (Xu, 2012). It is a kind of knowledge that is subjective and experience based (Pehkonen, 2003). According to Khader (2012), teachers' beliefs are defined as a group of ideas shaped in persons by their experiences during the learning processes. Borg (2001) stated that beliefs play a role as an essential guide for someone's behavior, both consciously or unconsciously. Both Pajares (1992) and Borg (2001) defined teacher belief as a necessary scaffolding that drives pedagogical actions occurring in teachers' lives. The sources of teachers' beliefs are as follows: 1). Teachers' experience as language learners, 2). Experience from teaching (Kindsvatter, Willen, & Ishler, 1988), 3). Teachers' personality, and 4). Education-based or principles (Abdi & Asadi, 2011). All of the aforementioned factors can contribute to forming teachers' beliefs.

1.2. The Relationship between Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

As various scholars (Borg, 2001; Pajares, 1992; Richards & Lockhart, 1996) argue, beliefs are essential in many aspects of teaching. Pajares (1992) noted that teachers' beliefs are greater than teachers' knowledge in influencing teachers' way in planning their lesson, teachers' kind of decisions, and teachers' general classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs are things that they personally understand to be true and occurred after their internal standard for evidence has been met. Teacher's belief is more influential than teacher's knowledge because teacher's knowledge is the small fraction of beliefs that meet the scientific standard of evidence, that is, teachers mostly acquire the knowledge but do not always use it. Otherwise, beliefs are more personal things that mostly come from their experience that they witnessed by themselves. Therefore, teacher's beliefs were far more influential than knowledge in

determining the way teachers organize and define tasks and problems, also were better predictors of teachers' behaviour in the classroom (Xu, 2012). Teachers' beliefs can influence explanations for individual variation in academic performance, the rights and wrongs in a classroom, and many other areas. Kennedy (1997) asserted that beliefs are used to assess the new ideas about teaching that teachers confront in their methods classes. Accordingly, teachers' beliefs are interrelated with their practices since their beliefs can influence the ways of their teaching.

1.3. Teaching English in Indonesian Rural Schools

Rural schools are defined as schools with fewer than 600 students, located at least five miles from an urbanized area, and have more deficiency than urban schools (Downes & Roberts, 2017). Rural schools are also known for their certain challenges in learning the English subject (Febriana et al., 2018). The challenges exist in Indonesian rural schools that occurred due to the country's vast geographic distance of rural to urban areas, the variety of languages, and the economic issues (Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012). Indonesia owns more than 700 local languages which make most Indonesian people bilingual or multilingual (Lie, 2002) but none of the languages is English. Thus, rural teachers who teach English mostly face a barrier to teach and communicate with rural students who are unable to speak English. For many of the people in rural areas, English is still considered a foreign language that is not necessarily perceived as offering immediate benefits to their lives. As a result, rural students tend to lack motivation in learning English because they rarely use the language in their everyday communication. These students are also not receiving sufficient parental support to learn English since many parents do not see the relevance of learning other than basic reading, writing, and math (Holguin & Morales, 2015). Moreover, within the Indonesian context, rural schools are known for their inadequate facilities and infrastructure (Moulton, 2001). Problems such as the lack of electricity, the lack of classroom equipment, lack of learning sources, and little support from school principals are the most commonly found in Indonesian rural schools (Febriana et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers' beliefs are worth exploring especially in relation to the current context where rural schools are among the hardest hit by the pandemic, due to the limited resources they have in running online classes. It would thus be insightful to comprehend how the pedagogical beliefs of these rural teachers have been affected by the pandemic and understand ways in which they navigate with the challenges.

2. METHOD

This study used a case study design involving interviews and observations. A case study is selected when the interests are insight discovery and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Hence, a case study design is used to obtain a thick description and experiential understanding since teachers' beliefs involve teachers' insights and in-depth understanding of their worlds (Creswell, 2007). The interviews and the observations were obtained to answer the following research questions: 1). What are the rural English teachers' beliefs about English Language Teaching in the rural school? 2). How does the worldwide pandemic change the teachers' beliefs of teaching English and their practices? The interviews were done in some stages: the preliminary interview via online chatting, the interview before an offline classroom observation, the interview on the offline classroom observation's day, the interview after the classroom observation, and the extended interview via online chatting to keep in touch with the participants. Observations for each teachers' class were also done in August 2020 to investigate the teachers' practices due to the pandemic. The observation was done by following the health protocol to obey the pandemic regulation. Researchers, the teachers, and the students in the class wore masks and kept distances. The classes were held only 30 minutes due to the pandemic regulation. Indeed, the regulation suggested the school be held online. However, since the students of the school have limitations to follow up the online learning, the school still welcomed the students who cannot access the online class.

This study took place in a Madrasa Aliyah Negeri equal to the high school level, located in Jambi Province which required 2 hours to get to the city and took a long unpaved, damaged road to access the school. The school does not have any sophisticated facilities to support the learning process and it also has a presence issue of students who are often absent when harvest season arrives. Moreover, the school cannot properly run online learning during the pandemic because of their limitations. Due to the economic issue, most students of the school cannot afford any appropriate electronic devices to follow online learning. In addition, there isn't any signal in their residence to supply online learning. As a result, the school has still run the school offline within the risk of the pandemic disease. Furthermore, the school that got approximately 396 students only has two English teachers. Thus, the two English teachers who suffer the obstacles are the participants of this study. The first teacher named Mina is a 42 year old woman, an honorarium teacher who has been teaching English in the rural school for 15 years. The second teacher named Bayu is a 48 year old man who has been teaching English in the rural school for 23 years as a civil servant teacher. Both of the teachers are English

Education graduated but they have different work statuses. Based on the challenges that the teachers faced, it would be meaningful to investigate their beliefs about teaching English in the rural school during the pandemic.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The teachers have been teaching in the rural school almost for decades. They have been through many challenges. According to the teachers, the toughest challenge is the students' lack of motivation in learning English. The students were not eager to learn English because they think English is a difficult subject, where the writing and the pronunciation are different. The second challenge that the teachers found troublesome is the lack of parental supports. The students' parents prefer their children to work as farm labourers than go studying at school. It is because most parents of the students in the school do not own higher educational background, which turns their mind-sets into unclear about the objective of education. The teachers also faced other challenges, such as inadequate facilities and damaged road access, but they did not find them more complicated than the other two challenges. Even so, they enjoy their work in the rural school that they never considered to move. They are comfortable with the kinship of the rural atmosphere and the supportive colleagues. The challenges and circumstances in the rural school have formed their beliefs about teaching English.

3.1. Teachers' Beliefs of English in the Rural School

The two teachers are aware of the global use of English. They realized that English is crucial in this era but they have different points of view. For Mina, English is necessary and will be used for her students' life. She believes that English is important for her students because almost every aspect of human life nowadays requires English.

Whether they like it or not, they will definitely use English. For example, they're going to use it in social media or use it to run electronic devices. English will be used at least, to learn technology that used English as the instruction. I believe that the students need to learn English for their daily life. (Mina)

Meanwhile, Bayu has a distinct viewpoint of English for the rural students. He believes that English is important for the students' future life. He opined that English is a special skill that is beneficial in their future workplaces. According to Bayu, English skills will facilitate the students to easily get a job. It is because English can enhance students' insights and knowledge from overseas.

By having good English skills, students can open a window to see the outside of their world. They can increase their insights and they can upgrade themselves with broader knowledge. That is why English is one of the skills needed in today's workforce. (Bayu)

Both teachers are conscious of the importance of English for the rural students. While Mina believes that English is necessary for the students' daily life, Bayu believes that English is influential for the students' future life.

3.2. Teachers' Beliefs of Teaching the in Rural School

Being a teacher in the rural context has shaped Mina and Bayu's beliefs about teaching. As Kennedy (1997) stated that the source of teacher beliefs is a product of reflection of their teaching experiences or socialization processes in the school context. In line with Kennedy, both teachers admitted that their beliefs of teaching when they were teacher-students has changed after being rural teachers. They had never expected that teaching English would be as challenging as they experienced in the rural schools.

Mina confessed that she thought a teacher's job is just teaching by giving and explaining the materials. However, since becoming a rural teacher, she understood a teacher's task is broader than just teaching, and a teacher has many responsibilities. About the change she said, "I came to understand that I need to know the students. I need to understand them. I need to embrace them. That is what I've learned here". Mina realized that her students need more of her attention that she cannot just teach as what she believed when she was young. The 15 years experienced Mina has learned that rural students need to be guided due to their less motivation. The rural school has changed her beliefs of teaching that teachers should be enthusiastic in teaching and never give up for the students.

To teach well is to teach with all of your heart. When the students do not understand what we mean even we have tried so hard, it doesn't mean we just give up or even stop there. If they did not understand today, try again tomorrow. Not even the next day, try another next day. This way is not working, then change to other ways. In my beliefs, although they may not one hundred percent get the lesson, but at least they try to learn, they learn to try. (Mina)

Mina's belief has influenced her practice in classroom, it turned out that Mina does not hesitate to repeat the lesson in one to two meetings. Moreover, based on the classroom observation data, Mina reviewed the previous learning materials at the beginning of the class and reviewed the day's learning materials at the end of the class.

Similar to Mina's, Bayu's belief in teaching has also altered during his career in the rural school. The old Bayu thought that an English teacher's task was only teaching the subject. However, after 23 years of becoming a rural teacher, he understood that he also needs to teach the students about life. As he said, "Seeing the students here has opened up my mind that being a teacher is not only about teaching and explaining the subject, but also teaching about life. I need to 'preach' them, giving them advice and motivation. I should become a teacher who can motivate students". In Bayu's point of view, he is responsible for giving advice and motivation to the students. Whether it is for motivating them to learn or motivating them in every aspect of life.

Good teaching for me is when students understand what we are saying. It can be the lesson, the values of life, politeness, or morals. As long as they understood what we, teachers, conveyed, and they carried out in their life, I believe it will be beneficial. For me, in teaching, I have to be a teacher who can motivate students to become better. Because a teacher's duty is not only to teach but also to educate. (Bayu)

Bayu's belief in becoming a motivating and motivated teacher has been reflected in his practice in the classroom. By the limited time of the offline classroom observation, I noted that Bayu has motivated the students once before the end of the class. He confirmed that he mostly told a story about inspiring people if there were a remaining time before the class end. He also sometimes met the students outside the class to giving them advice as what he confessed.

Bayu and Mina's beliefs of teaching had come from their experiences of what works best. Woodcock (2011) proposed that teachers' beliefs which reflected their actions and instructional decisions can be sourced from the findings of their own effectiveness. As Woodcock said, Bayu and Mina's beliefs had come from the same sources. They found that their students were less motivated and required more explications. Hence, they were teaching in ways that reflected what they believe works best for their students. To sum up, the teachers' beliefs of teaching have somewhat changed due to the rural context they experienced, the circumstances, and the challenges they had to overcome from the demotivated students. Their beliefs can be said to be reflected in their practices in terms of how they act and interact with students in the classroom.

3.3. The Pandemic, the Teachers' Beliefs & the Practices

The worldwide pandemic, COVID-19 has changed schools' regulations in relation to how teaching and learning are to be held. In Indonesia, the face-to-face

meeting in classes is strictly avoided. Considering the health issues and the virus transmission, the teaching and learning activities are held online. The ministry has suggested to avoid face-to-face meetings in classes. Although teachers are still required to go to school and teach from school, the students have to stay at home, learning via their smartphones, laptops, or computers. However, the current rural school cannot adhere to the regulation. Based on the teachers' confessions, the rural school still welcomed the students to study in the classrooms. The schools' reasons for accepting the students to come are: 1) the students do not own or cannot afford any adequate devices to follow up the online learning; 2) there isn't any adequate internet signals around the students' residence since the Telkom tower (a tower used for spreading phone lines and internet signals) has not built yet; 3) the students have some problems in accessing the online learning. Due to the limitations, most students still come to the school with some conditions: 1) the teaching and learning activities in classrooms are shortened to 30 minutes; 2) the health protocols (washing hands, wearing masks, keeping distances) are applied; 3) Only the students who cannot access the online learning is suggested to sit in the class.

The new regulations due to the pandemic have influenced the teachers' beliefs and practices. Both Mina and Bayu confessed that the new normal regulation has become something new that interferes with their routines. Mina admitted that the limited time complicates her practices. She could not do many lesson reviews at the beginning and at the end of the class to ensure the students' understanding. She should manage the thirty minutes as well as possible. She stated that the limited time made her not to expect to successfully carry the class activities based on the lesson plan. For Mina, at least, her students understand some new vocabularies of the day's material.

I found it becomes more challenging to teach the student with only thirty minutes. The time was not enough to achieve all the learning objectives according to the designed lesson plan. It was already a challenge then to achieve the objectives in the normal class, now I only have 30 minutes. (Mina)

Mina who believed that she should ensure the students' understanding by doing reviews and repetitions in the class cannot do what she used to do due to the limited time. She stated that the regulation has changed her viewpoints of teaching, that now she just delivers the learning materials and gives the students tasks. She did not have time for reviewing the materials with the students.

Just like Mina, Bayu also found the limited time as a new challenge in teaching the students. Bayu confessed that he cannot have a discussion section with the students due to the regulation. During the pandemic,

Bayu admitted that he just delivering the learning materials and giving tasks in one thirty-minutes meeting. There isn't sufficient time to hold a discussion section as what he used to do. He also complained about the lack of facilities that the students cannot afford. He opined that the government should notice and fix this problem. He confessed, "The government should pay attention to the rural students who cannot access the online learning. The students here are different with the urban students who got more convenience in the city. It is such a dilemma for us to still hold the class within such conditions, but we cannot let the students to just stop learning due to their limitations".

The limitations due to the pandemic have arisen a new dilemma. The rural school could not operate the school as before the pandemic because it can increase the risk of the virus transmission. However, they also could not force the students to learn via online school as they have tried before, because the students have just gone without any permission. The problem might be fixed if the students got any facilities to run the online school, thus, the teachers could still monitor the students at home. As Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, and Sethi (2020) found that online learning is helpful to ensure remote learning, manageable, and convenient to be accessed. Okawati (2020) also found that students are more enthusiastic to learn via online and teachers found online learning is effective to be applied. Therefore, it is understandable for Bayu and Mina to complain about their difficulties due to the pandemic while other teachers can use online learning effectively.

The pandemic has created new regulations for schools which made rural teachers who already owned difficulties need to face more challenges. The teachers cannot perform their practices like they used to do because of the limited time. Richards and Lockhart (1996) mentioned that teachers tend to apply one approach which they believe the most suitable for their students. Then, the established approach which is based on teachers' beliefs will be disrupted when the routines change (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). In other words, the new regulation has affected the teachers' practices which is the reflection of the teachers' beliefs.

4. CONCLUSION

The teachers' beliefs which arose from the teachers' experiences in the rural context has influenced their practices in the classes, in terms of how they act and interact with the students. Their beliefs of teaching English in the rural school are 1) teaching enthusiastically for students' understanding as English is necessary for the students' daily life; and 2) teaching by motivating the students since English is influential for the students' future life. However, the pandemic has modified the teachers' belief about teaching, and it reflected to their practices. The regulation during the

pandemic has complicates the teachers since they considered the limited time as a big deal. As a result, they become less idealist that they utilize the thirty-minutes meeting to just delivering the materials. The teachers' beliefs which reflected their practices in before and after the pandemic class might change again since belief is not a fixed thing and it is an experience-based thing. Furthermore, by the issue of this study, the government, hopefully, will pay attention to the issue and fix the problem as soon as possible.

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