

Exploring English Reading Barriers: A Teacher's Perspective from a Remote Elementary School

Jessica Angeline De Eloisa Tobing¹

Dedi²

Harmita Sari³

¹Master of Education, Department of Education and Human Potentials Development, National Dong Hwa University

²Doctoral Program, Department of Education and Human Potentials Development, National Dong Hwa University

³Master of Pedagogy Department, Muhammadiyah University of Palopo

¹angelineloisa18@gmail.com

²811288117@gms.ndhu.edu.tw

³harmita@umpalopo.ac.id

Abstract

Reading instruction in English at the elementary school level plays a crucial role in academic development, particularly for students in remote areas. This study aims to explore the reading challenges faced by students learning English at a remote elementary school in Taiwan, based on the perspectives of the foreign English teacher (FET). The focus of this research is to identify the barriers affecting students' reading abilities and to find teaching strategies that can overcome these challenges. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with the subjects being English teachers at an elementary school in a remote area. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a foreign English teacher (FET) and analyzed using the data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification methods. The results indicate that key challenges include low motivation, limited vocabulary, first language interference, curriculum gaps, and limited exposure to native English contexts. Beyond identifying barriers, this study contributes to the field of TEFL in under-resourced areas by proposing a localized pedagogical framework that aligns curriculum expectations with students' developmental readiness. It offers significant implications for policymakers regarding the necessity of early-grade exposure and provides educators with evidence-based strategies to bridge the home-school disconnect through enhanced family engagement and structured phonetic instruction.

Keywords: *English Reading Instruction, Remote Elementary School, EFL Learners, Teaching Strategies, Qualitative Research*

Introduction

Reading is a central component of educational development, particularly at the elementary school level. It is through reading that students acquire essential knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and develop both oral and written language skills (Rusmiati et al., 2022; Febriyanto et al., 2023; Taylor & Clarke, 2021). For young learners, reading is not merely a skill but a gateway to understanding diverse concepts and subjects across the curriculum. Effective reading instruction in early education is, therefore, crucial for fostering lifelong learning habits and academic success. Given its significance, it is imperative that elementary school teachers pay close attention to their students' reading development and identify areas where they may face challenges.

Comprehension is a core aspect of reading that requires students to interpret and make sense of the text they encounter (Rusmiati et al., 2022). This involves a range of cognitive processes, including decoding words, understanding sentence structure, and connecting ideas (Ehri, 2005). Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding students through these processes, helping them to interpret meaning accurately (Kame'enui & Baumann, 2012). However, achieving this requires an understanding of how students perceive written texts and the difficulties they might encounter while reading. By tailoring instructional approaches to these perceptions, teachers can foster a supportive learning environment that enhances reading comprehension and engagement.

Despite the best efforts of educators, elementary school students often face a range of obstacles in reading English. Common challenges include limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, spelling errors, slow reading pace, and incorrect use of grammar (Kasper et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2020; Larionova et al., 2023). These issues are compounded by other factors, such as a lack of prior exposure to English, minimal encouragement from parents, and the influence of their native language, which can interfere with their ability to grasp English phonetics and grammar (Akram et al., 2020). These combined challenges can result in frustration and decreased motivation, further hindering reading progress.

However, while linguistic and environmental challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts have been widely documented, there remains a paucity of research examining how these barriers manifest in remote and under-resourced elementary schools, particularly from the perspective of classroom practitioners. Most existing studies rely heavily on student performance data, often overlooking the qualitative insights of teachers who navigate the daily realities of instructional implementation. Furthermore, the specific impact of curriculum misalignment, in which national policy expectations conflict with students' developmental readiness, remains under-explored in the context of remote elementary schools in Taiwan. Evidence from classroom practice suggests that English reading instruction is introduced abruptly at higher grade levels without sufficient foundational exposure in earlier grades, placing unrealistic demands on both teachers and learners. This study addresses these gaps by prioritizing the perspective of the Foreign English Teacher (FET) to examine how structural, curricular, and contextual constraints interact to shape reading barriers and instructional challenges in remote educational settings.

Motivation and engagement are critical factors in the development of reading skills. Students who are motivated to read are more likely to persevere through challenging texts and develop a love for learning. Conversely, students who struggle with reading often exhibit lower levels of motivation, which can lead to a cycle of disengagement and poor academic performance. Research has shown that low reading achievement can negatively impact students' long-term educational trajectories, affecting their self-esteem, behavior, and attitude towards learning (Rafi et al., 2021). Thus, fostering a positive reading experience in the classroom is essential for building both competence and confidence in young readers.

Given the importance of reading proficiency and the challenges faced by students, elementary school teachers need to employ diverse strategies to address these obstacles. One effective approach is the use of differentiated instruction, where teaching methods are tailored to accommodate individual student needs. This might involve interactive activities, game-based learning, storytelling, or peer-assisted learning to engage students and build their reading confidence. Research has highlighted the benefits of such adaptive

teaching strategies, suggesting that they can lead to improved learning outcomes and greater student motivation (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Huang, 2010).

The present study seeks to examine the perceptions of English teachers at elementary schools in remote areas regarding the specific reading challenges their students face. *The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the Foreign English Teacher (FET) perspective within the under-represented context of remote Taiwanese elementary education. Unlike previous studies that rely heavily on student performance data, this research offers a granular, qualitative analysis of how national curriculum policies interact with local resource constraints and indigenous cultural factors to shape reading barriers.* By understanding these difficulties from the teachers' perspectives, this research aims to identify effective strategies that can enhance the reading proficiency of young learners. The findings will not only provide insights into the teaching practices currently used but also offer recommendations for addressing the barriers that hinder reading development in an elementary school setting. Ultimately, this study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on effective reading instruction and support the academic success of students learning English as a second language.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore English reading barriers in a remote elementary school in Taiwan from the perspective of a Foreign English Teacher (FET). A qualitative descriptive approach was selected because it allows for a rich, straightforward account of participants' experiences using their own language, without imposing heavy theoretical abstraction (Kim et al., 2017). The case study design is appropriate when the research seeks an in-depth understanding of a bounded system in this case, English reading instruction in a single remote school through a focused informant perspective.

The primary participant in this study was one Foreign English Teacher (FET) who taught English across multiple grade levels at the school. This teacher was selected through purposive sampling due to their comprehensive instructional role and sustained engagement with students' reading development. As the only foreign English teacher at the site, the FET possessed a unique and holistic view of curriculum implementation, student progress, and systemic constraints across grade levels.

Data were collected through multiple in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with the same FET over several sessions. Conducting repeated interviews enabled deeper reflection, clarification of earlier responses, and increased analytic depth. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol consisting of fifteen open-ended questions focusing on students' reading challenges, instructional strategies, and contextual constraints. Follow-up questions were used to probe emerging themes and ensure clarity.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed the qualitative analytic framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification. During data condensation, interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to English reading barriers. Codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories reflecting the FET's perceptions and instructional experiences.

To enhance analytic transparency, representative excerpts from the interview data are presented in the findings section to illustrate each theme. Conclusions were verified

through iterative comparison between the coded data and emerging interpretations, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the FET's perspective and lived teaching experience.

Research findings

The analysis of the interview data revealed a complex interplay of environmental, linguistic, and structural barriers affecting English reading. The findings are categorized into six major themes that emerged from the accounts of the five participating teachers: (1) lack of motivation driven by family factors, (2) limited vocabulary retention, (3) interference from the first language (L1), (4) misalignment between curriculum policy and student readiness, (5) insufficient exposure to authentic English contexts, and (6) variations based on student language backgrounds. While these themes reflect the collective insights of the interviewees, the following sections primarily utilize the detailed narrative of the Foreign English Teacher (FET) to vividly illustrate the pedagogical challenges, supported by consistent observations from local colleagues.

Table 1. Summary of Reading Barriers and Representative Evidence (Data Display)

Theme/Barrier	Description of Finding	Representative Quote (Evidence)
Lack of Motivation	Students lack engagement due to minimal emphasis on English in the home environment.	<i>"If the family doesn't care about English, why would [the students]? The motivation really anchors to the family."</i> (FET)
Limited Vocabulary	Students struggle with basic phonetics (CVC) and slow retention, requiring remedial instruction.	<i>"We are still at the level of CVC... it's so slow because I have to go back to the basics, like the sound of the letters."</i> (FET)
L1 Interference	The Chinese phonetic system interferes with English pronunciation (e.g., adding vowel sounds).	<i>"For instance, the word 'orange' is often pronounced as 'orangey' because of the phonetic interference from Chinese."</i> (FET)
Curriculum Gaps	A misalignment exists between the Grade 3 start policy and the lack of prior exposure in Grades 1-2.	<i>"The expectation of the curriculum is quite different... suddenly in grade 3, they are expected to read."</i> (FET)
Limited Native Context	Absence of authentic language environments hinders understanding of cultural nuances.	(Observation) Students struggle to grasp idiomatic expressions and cultural contexts due to isolation.

Lack of Motivation

A prominent theme emerging from the data was students' low motivation to engage with English reading, which the FET consistently linked to limited family support

at home. The FET emphasized that students' attitudes toward English were shaped primarily outside the classroom rather than by instructional strategies alone. This observation aligns with previous studies indicating that parental attitudes and home literacy environments play a critical role in shaping students' learning motivation (Akram et al., 2020; Haw & King, 2022; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014).

The FET stated, "If the family doesn't care about English, why would the students? The motivation really anchors to the family." In a later interview, the FET further explained that even motivated classroom activities often failed to sustain engagement once students returned home, noting, "At school they can be excited, but when there's no reinforcement at home, everything resets." These statements suggest that instructional efforts alone are insufficient when they are not supported by consistent reinforcement in the home environment.

These reflections indicate that motivational barriers were not perceived as individual student deficiencies but as structurally embedded within the home-school divide. From the FET's perspective, reading motivation was inseparable from family attitudes toward English, reinforcing findings from socio-educational and self-determination theories that conceptualize motivation as socially mediated rather than purely cognitive (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gardner, 2006; Reeve & Deci, 2018). Previous research has similarly demonstrated that students' intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in language learning are strongly influenced by parental involvement, emotional support, and literacy-related interactions at home (Mustafa et al., 2015; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Therefore, the motivational challenges observed in this study reflect broader systemic conditions rather than isolated classroom-level issues.

Limited Vocabulary

Another significant obstacle is students' limited vocabulary, which hinders their ability to recognize and understand words in English texts. The FET observed that many students are still working at the most basic phonetic level (CVC - consonant, vowel, consonant), and they often struggle with identifying and pronouncing even simple words. The FET mentioned, "We are still at the level of CVC... it's so slow because I have to go back to the basics, like the sound of the letters." This situation indicates that students are not building a sufficient vocabulary base at an early stage, which is crucial for advancing their reading skills. Research by Ehri (2005) and Kame'enui and Baumann (2012) supports these findings, asserting that vocabulary development is essential for achieving reading fluency and comprehension. Without a strong vocabulary foundation, students cannot move on to more complex reading tasks, which affects their overall reading proficiency.

First Language Interference

The influence of the students' first language, Chinese, also complicates their English learning process, particularly when it comes to pronunciation. The FET explained that many students mispronounce English words due to differences between the English and Chinese phonetic systems. For instance, the word "orange" is often pronounced as "orangey" because of the phonetic interference from Chinese. This finding aligns with the work of Hill (2023), which discusses the challenges posed by first language interference in language acquisition. The phonetic differences between English and Chinese create barriers in both pronunciation and comprehension, making it difficult for students to develop accurate language skills in English.

Curriculum Gaps

The FET identified a significant misalignment between national curriculum expectations and students' actual reading readiness. English reading instruction formally begins in Grade 3, despite minimal exposure in earlier grades, creating what the teacher perceived as an abrupt and unrealistic instructional demand. According to the FET, policy restrictions limit English exposure in Grades 1 and 2, resulting in insufficient foundational skills when formal reading instruction begins.

The FET explained that early-grade instruction was restricted to very basic content, stating, *"In grade one, I have taught them sound letters... A, A, A, Apple, just vocabulary words"*

However, by Grade 3, students were expected to read full sentences and dialogues, even though phonemic awareness had not been adequately developed. The FET expressed frustration, noting:

"It's so slow because I have to go back to the sound of the letters... We are still in the level of CVC... but in their book, they already need to read."

The teacher further emphasized the policy-related nature of this gap, stating:

"The expectation of the curriculum is quite different because they didn't allow Grade 1 and Grade 2 to be immersed with English... suddenly in Grade 3."

In addition, the FET described how this misalignment forced remedial instruction to replace developmental progression, explaining that much classroom time was spent rebuilding basic skills rather than advancing reading proficiency:

"I really had a difficulty... because the foundation of reading should be started when they were Grade 1."

These excerpts illustrate that, from the FET's perspective, students' reading difficulties were not primarily caused by ineffective teaching practices but by systemic curricular constraints. The absence of structured early exposure resulted in delayed phonics mastery, slow reading development, and increased instructional pressure in later grades. Consequently, teachers were required to prioritize foundational remediation over curriculum progression, limiting opportunities for higher-level literacy development.

Limited Exposure to Native English Contexts

The study also identified a lack of exposure to native English speakers as a major barrier to students' reading development. The FET noted that without exposure to native English contexts, students struggle to grasp idiomatic expressions and understand the cultural nuances of the language. This difficulty in understanding English expressions and vocabulary affects their overall reading comprehension. The FET's observation is supported by research that highlights the importance of native speaker interaction in language learning. Hill (2023) argues that exposure to native speakers is essential for developing fluency in reading and understanding the subtleties of the language. The absence of this exposure in remote areas makes it more challenging for students to develop language proficiency.

Differences in Language Backgrounds

The FET's observations also highlighted that students' language backgrounds play a significant role in their academic engagement. For instance, students from the Amis indigenous community, despite having a similar alphabet to English, still faced challenges in language acquisition. The FET pointed out, "The girls are really performing well, but the boys are passive," suggesting that gender-specific factors might influence students' engagement in the classroom. These differences in performance underscore the need for

a more individualized teaching approach that takes into account the students' cultural and gender backgrounds.

Discussion

The discussion section interprets the research findings by contextualizing them within the existing literature and theories in language acquisition and education. The results provide new insights into the challenges of teaching English in a remote area and offer a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence language learning in such contexts.

Motivation and Family Influence

The study's findings on the impact of family involvement on student motivation are consistent with Gardner's (2006) socio-educational model of second language acquisition, which posits that learners' attitudes are heavily shaped by their immediate social environment. Our results confirm that in this remote context, the lack of parental emphasis on English creates a psychological barrier to learning. This aligns with recent findings by Akram et al. (2020), who reported that in rural primary schools, minimal parental encouragement significantly hampers English literacy. Furthermore, Mustafa et al. (2015) argue that positive attitudinal factors are often more predictive of success than aptitude alone. By corroborating these studies, our research suggests that the "motivation deficit" observed is not an isolated local issue but a systemic characteristic of under-resourced educational settings where home-school alignment is weak.

Vocabulary Development and Reading Fluency

The limited vocabulary of students, as revealed by the study, is a well-documented challenge in language education. Ehri (2005) and Kame'enui and Baumann (2012) both stress the importance of vocabulary acquisition as the foundation for reading comprehension. The difficulty students face in moving beyond the basic phonetic level (CVC words) indicates that they are not building a strong vocabulary base early enough in their education. This finding underscores the need for targeted vocabulary instruction in the early grades. Interactive vocabulary-building activities, such as games and flashcards, could significantly enhance students' ability to recognize and understand words, thereby improving their reading fluency and comprehension.

First Language Interference

The interference of the students' first language, Chinese, with their English pronunciation is a challenge that has been highlighted in previous studies. Hill (2023) discusses the difficulties that arise when the phonetic systems of the first and second languages differ, particularly in pronunciation. The findings of this study corroborate Hill's research, emphasizing that first language interference complicates both pronunciation and comprehension. To address this challenge, the study suggests implementing phonetic training and pronunciation practice tailored to the specific difficulties posed by Chinese-English language interference. This could help students develop more accurate pronunciation and reduce the impact of first language interference on their English learning.

Curriculum Misalignment

The misalignment between the curriculum expectations and students' actual preparedness is another critical issue identified in the study. The abrupt introduction of English in grade 3, without prior exposure in earlier grades, creates a gap that is difficult to bridge. This finding is consistent with Hill (2023), who argues that curriculum expectations should be aligned with students' developmental stages. The study highlights the need for earlier and more gradual exposure to English, starting in the lower grades, to prevent students from falling behind when English instruction becomes mandatory.

Exposure to Native English Contexts

The lack of exposure to native English speakers is a significant barrier to students' development of language skills, particularly in understanding idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances. The FET's observations align with research that emphasizes the importance of authentic language experiences in language learning. Hill (2023) stresses that exposure to native English speakers is essential for improving fluency and comprehension. To address this gap, the study suggests integrating more opportunities for students to interact with native speakers, either through virtual exchanges, media, or community engagement programs.

Gender-Specific Differences

The study also revealed differences in academic engagement between boys and girls, with girls performing better than boys. This observation highlights the need for gender-responsive teaching strategies. While gender differences in academic achievement have been widely studied, this study provides a specific context for understanding how cultural and personality factors may influence students' engagement in learning. Tailoring teaching strategies to account for these differences can help ensure that both boys and girls have equal opportunities to succeed in language learning.

Conclusion

This study has explored the reading challenges faced by elementary school students in a remote area, as perceived by their foreign English teacher (FET). The findings reveal that limited motivation, constrained vocabulary, first language interference, curriculum gaps, and restricted exposure to native English contexts are significant obstacles impacting students' reading development. These barriers are compounded by the geographical isolation of the school, where limited resources and minimal support from students' home environments further hinder progress in English literacy. Despite these challenges, the FET has demonstrated that adaptive and culturally responsive teaching strategies such as game-based learning, Total Physical Response (TPR), and scaffolding can effectively support reading engagement and comprehension among young learners.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on remote educational settings, highlighting the unique difficulties and needs of English learners in under-resourced areas. By documenting the teacher's strategies and experiences, this study underscores the critical role of adaptable and engaging instruction in overcoming reading barriers. The research provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and families, suggesting that reading success can be fostered through collaborative efforts between school and home environments. Enhanced family involvement, targeted vocabulary instruction, and

dedicated teacher training are recommended to address the motivational and developmental needs of students.

While this study provides an in-depth perspective from a single teacher, its scope is limited by its focus on one remote school, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences in other rural or urban contexts. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample to include multiple remote schools, as well as comparing findings across different regions. Additional longitudinal studies may also offer insights into the long-term impact of early reading interventions on English literacy outcomes in remote areas.

In conclusion, by addressing both the challenges and successful strategies identified in this study, educators and stakeholders can work towards a more inclusive and supportive reading environment for English learners in remote schools. Early exposure to English, family engagement programs, and sustained teacher development emerge as vital steps in enhancing reading proficiency and fostering a positive educational experience for students in these settings.

Suggestions

To broaden the scope of this study, future research should incorporate a variety of remote elementary schools from different regions in Taiwan, offering a wider view of the challenges faced in English reading across diverse remote settings. Longitudinal research is advised to examine how early intervention strategies affect students' ongoing reading skills and language growth over time. Moreover, upcoming studies should assess the success of technology-based methods, such as virtual interactions with native English speakers and AI-driven literacy tools, in overcoming the specific obstacles highlighted in this study, particularly vocabulary deficiencies and limited exposure to genuine English environments. For educators, it is highly recommended that schools implement extensive professional development programs for teachers, focusing on differentiated instruction techniques with an emphasis on culturally responsive and gender-sensitive teaching methods. Additionally, creating school-family partnership programs, like English reading clubs and parent involvement workshops, would foster community support for English literacy advancement in resource-limited remote areas.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

Author Contributions

All authors have made substantial, direct, and intellectual contributions to the work, encompassing but not limited to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, drafting the original manuscript, and reviewing and editing. Each author has read and approved the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available on request

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