


Teacher as Researcher: Exploring Competencies and Challenges of Urban and Rural English School Teachers

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A B S T R A C T

Professional teachers are required to possess both pedagogical skills and good writing abilities, which are essential for their professional development. However, many teachers in Aceh, Indonesia encounter challenges in writing scientific papers. This study explores and compares their perceived abilities in conducting classroom action research, as well as the challenges faced by English teachers in urban and rural areas. A mixed-methods research design was employed, conducted in schools across Great Aceh, West Aceh, and South Aceh provinces. The sample comprised 16 teachers, who participated through questionnaires and interviews. The findings reveal significant differences in research abilities between urban and rural teachers. Urban teachers demonstrate greater readiness for conducting classroom action research compared to teachers in rural areas. Factors underlying these challenges include limited time due to heavy teaching loads, the need for peer support in research activities, inadequate school facilities, and insufficient training

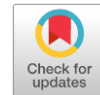
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INTRODUCTION

Teachers play a crucial role in improving the quality of education in Indonesia by implementing effective strategies and initiatives to meet educational standards and goals (Val Madin & Swanto, 2019). To ensure professional teachers, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive selection process followed by continuous career development once they begin teaching (Ryan, et al., 2017). Furthermore, teachers are expected to continually develop their professionalism and possess the skills needed succeed in their roles. However, the development of professional teachers is not an instant process but requires sustained, long-term effort. Regular participation in training sessions, attendance at seminars, and engagement in research activities such as classroom action research (CAR) are integral components of this ongoing professional development process.

Currently, Conducting CAR is an obligation for teacher in Indonesia as a prerequisite for teacher career promotion as part of developing teachers' professionalism (Nurhasanah, et al.,2020; Sukmayadi, et al., 2011). Basically, CAR is a way for teachers to reflect their own practice and to transform as teacher leader (Ryan, et al., 2017). Through CAR, teachers can improve the learning process in their classrooms, thereby enhancing the quality of education. However, not all teachers can write these scholarly articles well. Many teachers face career obstacles due to difficulties in writing scholarly papers. Among the various language skills, writing is considered the most difficult. This is evident from the low level of scientific publications by teachers in Indonesia (Nurhasanah, et al., 2020)

In numerous cases, CAR has been repeatedly reported to be a serious challenge for the teachers. Widyoko (2004) discovered that several teachers were ineligible in conducting CAR

and their research papers were unacceptable. One of the reasons is that the topics presented in the study are too broad. This is worsened further by their tendency to commit plagiarism as a final option. (Norasmah & Chia, 2016) contended that teachers' lack of comprehension of action research is related to their view that action research implementation entails extra effort unrelated to teaching and learning practices.

When it comes to urban and rural areas, CAR is also a great concern for many teachers as the majority of them have rare access to research materials (Kayaoglu, 2015) and lack of understanding of CAR (Burns, (2009a). Teachers' reflection abilities are generally poor, and they frequently do not know whom to consult when faced with challenges related to their action research projects (Norasmah & Chia, 2016). Furthermore, they are not compensated for conducting research (Salleh, 2006). As a result, there is widespread skepticism among educators about the entire process of action research and its positive effects.

The current study aims to systematically map the research competencies and challenges encountered by both urban and rural school teachers, thereby providing insights into the essential skills needed for conducting research and the primary obstacles hindering the development of these competencies in diverse educational settings. Furthermore, it will contribute to thinking for actions to be taken to help language teachers (primarily those in EFL contexts) enhance their research skills in order to maximize the benefits of classroom research for their professional development. The research questions guiding this particular study are: (1) How do teachers perceive their competence in conducting action research? (2) What primary challenges do urban and rural school teachers face in developing their research competencies?

METHOD

This study aims to explore the perceived competencies in action research among teachers from both urban and rural schools, as well as the primary challenges they encounter in developing these competencies. The study employs a mixed-methods approach by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This allows for a comprehensive examination of research competencies and challenges among English teachers in urban and rural areas across Aceh. The qualitative data were collected through a series of questions in an in-depth interview exploring teachers' understanding about CAR, their involvement in the research, the challenges they encounter, and their expectation for future implementation of CAR.

Participants

The participants were English language teachers from public and private junior and senior high schools in both rural and urban areas across Great Aceh, West Aceh, and South Aceh Districts. Using a multistage sampling procedure (Creswell, 2009), 16 English teachers were recruited for the quantitative phase of the study. They are working across 4 schools, with 8 teachers in urban areas and 8 teachers in rural areas. Analysis of the demographic data revealed a range of teaching experience from 3 to 25 years, with the majority (71%) having less than 10 years of experience. Additionally, employing a purposive sampling technique, seven English teachers were selected for one-on-one interviews.

Table 1. Teachers' demographic characteristics

Teacher (pseudonym)	School (pseudonym)	Category CS=civil servant, NCS=non civil servant	Gender	Experience (Years)	School Location
T1	A	CS	M	3	Rural
T2	B	CS	F	12	Rural
T3	C	NCS	F	3	Rural
T4	D	NCS	F	8	Rural
T5	E	CS	F	11	Rural

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T6	F	CS	F	8	Rural
T7	G	CS	F	7	Rural
T8	G	CS	M	14	Rural
T9	H	CS	F	13	Urban
T10	I	CS	M	4	Urban
T11	J	CS	F	9	Urban
T12	I	CS	F	23	Urban
T13	K	NCS	M	3	Urban
T14	K	NCS	M	4	Urban
T15	L	CS	F	16	Urban
T16	L	CS	F	8	Urban

The first research aims to investigate teachers' perceived competence in conducting action research and to compare the abilities between teachers in different locations. The questionnaire responses will be categorized into four levels of competence.

Table 2. Questionnaire response's total score and description

Range	Level	Description
0.00 - 0.99	1	I am beginning to apply this competency.
1.00 - 1.99	2	I am applying this competency but have areas which require improvement.
2.00 - 2.99	3	I am applying this competency with confidence.
3.00 - 3.99	4	I am applying this competency with strength

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

English Teachers' Involvement in the Classroom Action Research

The first research question seeks information about the Acehese EFL teachers' prior involvement in CAR project. In this study, we explored into the various matters that teachers encounter when conducting action research, including both the potential benefits and obstacles they face. Data from questionnaire revealed that most teachers (at 75%) in Great Aceh, West Aceh, and South Aceh districts have never conducted CAR. According to the data elicited from the participants' responses, 11 English teachers reported have never conducted CAR. Meanwhile the rest of the participants (n=5) admitted that they have generated CAR reports. Interestingly, one participant who ticked 'yes' admitted that they did not write the reports by their own but was the work of someone paid to write the paper.

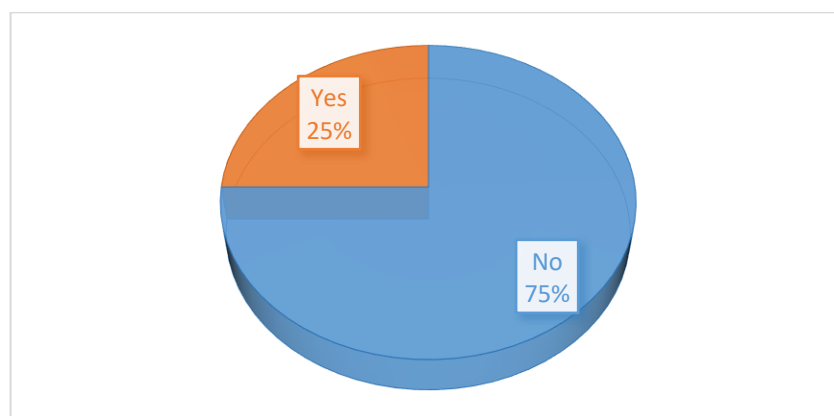


Chart 1. Teachers' Response about whether or not they have conducted CAR Project

English Language Teachers' Perceived Competency

The first research question aims to explore English teachers' perceived competence and compare their abilities in both urban and rural areas. The results reveal significant discrepancies between the abilities of teachers in these different locations.

The explanation below is the comparison of teacher perceived competence between English teachers in urban and rural areas. It is evident that teacher in urban areas are better in terms of their perceived competency rather than teacher in rural areas with teacher in urban areas mean is 2.6, and teacher in rural areas is 2.0. It is also important to note that there are no single items that teacher in rural areas are surpassing teacher in urban areas in terms of their competence. Interestingly, a notable gap is evident in the responses to Q12, where teachers in rural areas averaged 1.8, compared to 2.6 among urban teachers. This suggests that rural teachers face challenges in designing action plans based on their teaching experiences. Although both groups of English teachers are rated at level 2, indicating a need for improvement, urban teachers are generally seen as more capable. The data clearly shows that urban teachers have a higher perceived competency across all measured items. Specifically, the mean competency rating for urban teachers is 2.6, while for rural teachers it is 2.0. Additionally, there are no specific competency items where rural teachers outperform urban teachers.

Challenges Urban and Rural School Teachers Face in Developing Their Research Competencies

The findings from the questionnaire on the obstacles faced by English teachers reveal a significant discrepancy in competence between teachers in urban and rural schools. These challenges were further explored through interviews conducted during the qualitative phase of the study. In this phase, the researchers purposefully selected 16 participants from both urban and rural schools. The interview data indicated that while some obstacles varied based on demographic areas, others were common across both settings. The results highlighted four main topics: (1) limited time due to heavy teaching duties; (2) the need for colleagues to support research actions; (3) school facilities and (4) insufficient training.

1. Limited time due to heavy teaching duties

Teachers in urban areas acknowledge having busy teaching schedules due to the numerous study groups (*rombel* in Bahasa Indonesia) and the large number of students.

T9: "We have many students, so we teach full-time. Additionally, we participate in various activities, both at school and within the teachers' association."

Additionally, she said, "we are busy with teaching and preparing material for students, then we have to provide a lesson plan. We don't have enough time."

Meanwhile, teachers in rural areas face unique challenges. While their students and association meetings might not be as busy, they still have significant responsibilities, particularly in creating learning materials. However, due to limited facilities and resources, teachers in rural areas require more time to prepare effectively. T1 puts it:

T1: "English is now taught four hours per week. Even so, action research requires a large amount of time. I need to concentrate. It does not appear to be enough time."

2. The need for colleagues to support research actions

For a senior teacher like T12, conducting CAR is seen as necessary because her career progression depends on implementing CAR in her English classes. However, she is less concerned because most of her teacher colleagues understand that CAR is integral to professional development. As a result, she has friends to share and discuss research with. As she puts it, "Yes, sometimes we do research together. This way, we can share our findings and review the report, just like a peer review."

This is also in line with T13 and T14, both novice teachers in a modern private school. Although they are not required to conduct research, their curiosity about action research encourages them to do so. Additionally, their experience in research is still fresh, as they might be classified as fresh graduates.

T14 said, "We've been talking about classroom issues a lot lately and noticing some similarities. I think it would be great to do research together, if we can find time outside of teaching."

Teachers in rural areas often find themselves in isolated situations. T4, T5, and T6 have shared their struggles with not having peers to discuss research or academic matters with. They stressed the need for supportive colleagues. In a notable case, T11, who has 11 years of experience, mentioned being advised by a friend to hire a service rather than discussing research challenges.

T11: "For career promotion, I had to submit an action research report. I opted to pay someone to assist with it. In the past, I did the revision with friends and it took a long time, one of my friends eventually gave up."

3. School Facilities

From the interview findings, the themes emerged is also about school facilities. In this case, school facilities will influence their decision in doing action research. Teachers in rural areas are grappling with inadequate school facilities, including limited internet access and insufficient library resources.

The statement was echoed by a long-tenured teacher in the following comments:

T8: "For me, action research is really important, especially when we can write it ourselves. But the problem is, it's hard for me to write because my internet connection isn't stable. And we don't have library. We need to look for references, right?"

T8 is a teacher in rural areas. He tried to write an action research report, but when it was time to submit it, he kept getting it sent back for revisions. After a long process of revising, he ended up handing it over to a reviewer to finish it for him.

In line with teacher T8, T3, a novice teacher who has been working for three years in a boarding school in a rural area, complained about the situation at school. She insisted,

"It is difficult for us to write the report. You can see, we have a lot of students, but lack teachers, and the building is very old. We want to write, but we are not comfortable—the teacher's room is very small and crowded. The electricity is unreliable, and the internet is very bad."

On the contrary, most teachers in urban areas admitted that they have the facilities needed to write or finish the action research report. One of the teachers explained,

T15: "We have no issues with facilities; everything is working. For me, I like to write at school during the hours I don't teach. I can sit in my own room. Sometimes, if I need more references, I can go to the main library in the city. It is a convenient place."

It can be inferred that adequate facilities play a vital role in encouraging teachers to write. However, many teachers are initially hesitant to undertake action research because they lack the necessary resources.

4. Insufficient training

All English teachers agree that they require additional training in conducting Classroom Action Research (CAR), given that their teaching role differs significantly from that of a researcher. However, for teachers living in urban areas, they benefit from occasional training offered not only by the education department but also by university lecturers. In this regard, T10 expressed his view as follows:

“I'm currently working on my second research project, and it feels much easier this time around. I've attended training sessions organized by the Education and Culture Department, as well as some workshops hosted by university lecturers” Furthermore, some teachers who had received training admitted that they are perplexed by the different style of CAR. As one educator puts it:

Some teachers from rural areas add that they have been trained, but such meetings are infrequently held. T6 and T7 put it this way:

T6: “The official department held a one-day training session that my friend and I attended. Since then, we haven't received any more invitations”

T7: “Unlike my friends teaching in urban areas, we rarely get such training opportunities out here. We really hope to be invited to more training sessions in the future.”

In contrast, teachers in urban areas receive more training not only from the state office of education but also from university lecturers who frequently hold workshops on CAR

T12: “Yes, I was there for CAR during the training. So, the tutor explained very clearly about CAR and we understand. The tutor's expertise is CAR. Do you know him? I'll try to do it (CAR) again next time.”

DISCUSSION

The overall findings show that with the often-competing demands of teaching and preparing learning media, teachers often find it difficult to reflect deeply on their teaching through the CAR report. The quantitative results delineate that English teachers do not sufficiently possess the ability to do the research. It is, indeed, interesting to find that teachers' confidence to conduct CAR was also influenced by whether their schools are located in an urban or rural area. English teachers in urban areas, who have a longer tenure in the classroom and much easier access to training seem to have a viewpoint that differs from that of teachers in rural areas. The findings also reveal a notable contrast in training opportunities between urban and rural teachers. Urban educators benefit from regular workshops conducted not only by the state office of education but also by local university lecturers focusing on CAR. These disparities suggest the need for more professional development options in rural areas, which parallel the support presently given in urban areas.

Based on the interview results, the most common challenge reported by teachers in both rural and urban areas regarding action research is a lack of time. This issue is inevitable due to varying teaching responsibilities and participation in subject teacher associations across different school types. Also, teachers' motivation and enthusiasm for conducting research can be indirectly influenced by adequate school facilities. When classrooms are comfortable and equipped with resources, technology, and

research materials, it creates an environment conducive to effective research. Additionally, having comfortable workspaces that encourage discussion and collaboration among teachers can further boost their motivation to engage in research activities.

Furthermore, most rural school teachers struggle to receive adequate learning support in doing CAR. The study revealed a notable disparity in responses to Q12, where rural teachers averaged 1.8 compared to 2.6 among urban teachers. This indicates that rural teachers face challenges in effectively designing action plans based on their teaching experiences. A key insight from interviews is the difficulty in addressing this issue due to the insufficient research training provided to rural teachers. This finding underscores the importance of enhancing professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of educators in rural settings, particularly in research methodology. Currently, teachers in rural areas have a very limited access to CAR training. Additionally, the challenges teachers face in conducting research, including low motivation and inadequate training, are significant. This aligns with findings from researchers like Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009), who emphasized that teachers' motivations not only determine their decision to conduct research but also influence their persistence and effort towards achieving research goals. Therefore, teachers' engagement in research can be strongly impacted by these motivational factors. CAR is conducted due to requirements from authorities, not from their own interest. This is consistent with Salleh's (2006) study, which found that action research must be conducted from top down rather than bottom up. This, as a result, leads teachers to understand that CAR is not prioritized as an evaluation of teachers. Accordingly, the recognition of language practitioners, such as language teachers, in scholarly publications is lagging (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant challenges teachers face in engaging with action research, despite its importance in enhancing their professionalism. It underscores noticeable disparities in competence between teachers in rural and urban areas. Addressing these disparities calls for strategic policies that prioritize equitable access to training for rural educators. Initiatives could include subsidizing online courses or organizing mobile workshops to overcome geographic barriers. Furthermore, strengthening partnerships with universities could greatly enhance training initiatives for rural teachers, potentially through joint workshops or specialized guest lectures tailored to their specific educational needs. These efforts are crucial steps towards fostering a more balanced and effective professional development landscape for teachers across different geographical settings.

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