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# Highly Immersive Programme (HIP): The Challenges Faced by ESL Teachers in Rural Schools

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**Abstract.** The Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is an initiative introduced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) to enhance pupils' English language proficiency. Implemented under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), HIP promotes language acquisition through immersive activities and increased exposure to English in both formal and informal settings. This qualitative study explores the challenges faced by ESL teachers in implementing HIP in rural Malaysian schools. Employing a multiple case study design, the research involved semi-structured focus group interviews with 15 ESL teachers across five rural schools. Additional data collection methods included responses via Google Forms and photographic documentation of HIP activities. Findings indicate that ESL teachers encounter several critical challenges, including limited teaching resources, low parental involvement, students' limited English proficiency, and the burden of planning and executing HIP activities amidst an already demanding workload. These challenges

significantly impede the programme's effectiveness in improving pupils' English skills. The study highlights the need for comprehensive support for teachers, such as increased resource allocation, initiatives to foster parental engagement, and measures to reduce teacher workload. Effective collaboration among school administrators, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders is essential to overcoming these barriers and ensuring the successful implementation of HIP.

**Keywords:** Highly Immersive Programme (HIP), English learning, Education, Rural schools, Challenges

## 1. Introduction

The Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is an initiative by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) aimed at enhancing students' English language proficiency (Erlinda & Melor, 2019). Initially launched in 1999, HIP was developed under the *Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the Command of English* (MBMMBI) policy, targeting students from Year 1 to Form 5 (Ministry of Education, 2016). The programme has since been implemented in all government schools across Malaysia. HIP requires schools to carry out a variety of English language activities designed to increase students' exposure to and use of the language in authentic contexts. According to Bitty (2017), the ultimate aim of HIP is to produce students who are confident and competent in communicating in English. To fulfill its objectives, HIP encourages the organization of activities across four key domains: in-class, out-of-class, extra-class, and outreach programmes.

According to Ardi et al. (2012), Malaysia faces considerable challenges in its efforts to reform rural schools, with geographical barriers posing significant obstacles to educational development in these areas. These challenges inevitably affect the process of revitalizing and improving the quality of education in rural settings. Despite these concerns, there remains a lack of comprehensive research that specifically examines the conditions and quality of educational delivery and services in rural schools. A thorough and systematic investigation is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the current educational landscape in these regions and to inform effective policy and intervention strategies.

The implementation of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) in rural schools presents numerous challenges. Teachers in these areas often feel inadequately prepared and lack the confidence needed to deliver the programme effectively. This issue is further exacerbated by their already demanding workload, which includes teaching duties, administrative responsibilities, extracurricular involvement, and managing students' behavioural issues. The cumulative burden contributes to teacher burnout, decreased motivation, and reduced creativity, particularly in organizing out-of-class HIP activities (Catherine et al., 2020; Creagh et al., 2025). In light of these concerns, this paper aims to investigate the challenges faced by English language teachers in implementing HIP in rural primary schools across Malaysia.

## 2. HIP Program in Malaysia

The Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) was implemented nationwide by the Ministry of Education Malaysia with the aim of encouraging students to actively engage with the English language (Erlinda & Melor, 2019). According to Bitty (2017), the goal of HIP is to immerse students in environments rich in English through a variety of engaging activities aimed at sparking their interest and enthusiasm for the language. The ultimate objective is to develop students who are both confident and proficient in using English for communication.

According to the Ministry of Education (2016), the implementation of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is guided by several key objectives. The first objective is to create a dynamic and immersive English-language learning environment within schools. This involves the integration of diverse activities, resources, and pedagogical approaches that consistently expose students to English in engaging and meaningful ways, thereby enriching their overall learning experience.

The second objective is to increase students' active use of English during school hours by embedding more English-speaking opportunities—such as conversations, activities, and exercises—into the daily curriculum. This consistent practice is intended to help students develop practical language skills. The third objective is to strengthen students' overall command of the English language through structured and intensive instruction. This includes delivering comprehensive lessons that address all core language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—and supplementing classroom learning with extracurricular initiatives such as English clubs, debates, and drama performances to further build students' confidence and proficiency.

However, the programme initially struggled to achieve its core objectives and gradually lost momentum over time (Catherine et al., 2020). In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Education took steps to revitalize HIP by reinforcing its focus and implementation under the ongoing *Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the Command of English* (MBMMBI) policy. The revitalized version of HIP was piloted in selected schools in 2016, and by 2018, it had been fully implemented across all Malaysian schools (Catherine et al., 2020).

The reintroduction of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) placed strong emphasis on the implementation of consistent and structured English language activities (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Schools were encouraged to organize a variety of events such as English language competitions, drama performances, reading programmes, and interactive language games. These activities were designed to make the learning of English more enjoyable and engaging, thereby enhancing students' motivation and interest in the language (Jiew, 2017). In addition, the HIP framework aimed to integrate the use of English into students' daily routines. This was achieved through initiatives such as establishing English corners, conducting morning assemblies in English, and encouraging the use of English in informal settings, including school cafeterias and playgrounds. This comprehensive approach sought to cultivate a language-

rich environment where students could naturally engage with and improve their English language skills.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Challenges in implementation of HIP**

A study by Erlinda and Melor (2019) identified low English proficiency among students as a major barrier to the successful implementation of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) in schools. Their research outlined several challenges that impede efforts to enhance language proficiency among primary school pupils through HIP, particularly in rural areas. One of the key issues is the scarcity of teaching and learning resources in these schools. Scholars from various contexts have emphasized that effective language instruction depends heavily on the availability of adequate materials and infrastructure (Falah et al., 2023; Harmer, 2007; Gerfanova et al., 2025). In rural Malaysian schools, where many families are from low-income backgrounds, limited facilities and resources significantly hinder teachers' ability to plan and conduct effective English language activities (Haidar & Fang, 2019; Mathew & Yamat, 2022). This lack of infrastructure not only restricts pedagogical creativity but also contributes to lower teacher motivation (Hamid, 2020). Furthermore, challenges such as limited parental involvement, insufficient time, and a lack of support and cooperation exacerbate the difficulties teachers face in delivering HIP effectively (Young, 2003; Hamid, 2020).

#### **3.2 Challenges faced by ESL teachers in the implementation of HIP**

Another significant challenge faced by teachers is the lack of parental support (Catherine et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2024). Both Catherine et al. (2020) and Imran et al. (2024) found that many parents were not actively participating in outdoor activities organized by teachers as part of the HIP. Due to work commitments and limited time, parents were unable to engage in the programmes to which they were invited. Muñoz and Cadierno (2021) emphasized the importance of creating an English-rich environment to improve language proficiency. In this regard, parents play a crucial role in fostering such an environment at home. Without their active involvement and support, the objectives of the programme cannot be fully realized.

### **4. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which is well-suited for exploring complex educational issues, as highlighted by scholars such as Merriam and Tisdell (2015). In the local context, the educational challenge is that the rural environment does not provide adequate support for students to engage with English outside the classroom. In these areas, students typically do not hear English being spoken in their daily lives and lack opportunities to interact with peers in English (Pramesty et al., 2022). In this study, the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is being implemented in most government schools with the goal of enhancing students' English proficiency, particularly by improving their motivation and confidence to practice the language.

#### **4.1 Sampling and Participants**

This study employed a purposive sampling method, selecting participants based on two specific characteristics relevant to the research question. The selection criteria were: (i) English teachers who had implemented the HIP programme at their schools, and (ii) teachers who volunteered to participate in the research. Purposive sampling is widely applicable across various research paradigms, and it facilitates the identification of a high-quality sample while minimizing biases. This technique is commonly used in research to enhance the dependability and credibility of the findings (Friday & Leah, 2024).

This approach is commonly used in qualitative research, as it allows for the intentional selection of individuals who can provide rich and relevant data. A total of 15 ESL teachers from five rural schools in Malaysia volunteered to participate in this study. The focus of the research is on these five schools, where students have shown low English proficiency levels, making them ideal sites for investigating the challenges and effectiveness of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP).

#### **4.2 Research Instruments**

The three main research instruments used to collect data for this study were semi-structured focus group interviews, photos of HIP activities, and Google Forms. The photos captured materials and activities used in HIP, providing visual context that enriched the qualitative data and facilitated a more comprehensive analysis. The use of Google Forms offered flexibility for participants, particularly those with time constraints, allowing them to respond at their convenience. This method is widely accepted in qualitative research, especially when open-ended questions are used to elicit detailed responses. Participants were sent a link to the form via WhatsApp and were given one week to submit their responses.

#### **4.3 Trustworthiness Measures**

This research methodology includes several measures designed to ensure the quality of the data while accommodating the needs of the participants:

Triangulation was employed in this study through the use of three research instruments: interviews, Google Forms, and photos of the HIP programme. The combination of these instruments enhances the robustness of the data collection process, ensuring that the insights gathered are both credible and contextually rich. This approach aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) assertion that triangulation strengthens the reliability and depth of research findings.

**Validation of Interview Questions:** To ensure the validity of the semi-structured interview questions, four TESL experts with over 20 years of experience were engaged to review and validate the questions. Additionally, the researchers employed member checking by sharing interview transcriptions with participants, allowing them to review and correct any inaccuracies. This process helped ensure that the findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives.

To ensure the reliability of the data, the coding process was reviewed by four experts, and Cohen's Kappa values were calculated. The Cohen's Kappa value for this study was 0.87, indicating a high level of inter-coder reliability.

#### 4.4 Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the Google Form responses, which were provided in Malay, were translated into English by the researchers. Malay is the native language of the participants, and it was used during data collection to ensure participants felt comfortable and were able to express their ideas and thoughts more fully. This approach was crucial in gathering rich and detailed data.

#### 4.5 Ethical considerations

To ensure adherence to proper research ethics (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018), several measures were implemented throughout this study. Participants were provided with consent forms to formally agree to take part in the research. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, ensuring their anonymity during data collection and in any subsequent published findings.

The researchers obtained the necessary permissions to conduct research in Malaysian schools, in accordance with established protocols. As outlined in the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research in Malaysia, researchers must secure approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE) before conducting research in government schools. After receiving consent from the MOE, the researchers sought approval from the relevant District Education Office and subsequently from the school principals. This hierarchical approval process ensures that all relevant authorities are informed and have granted permission for the research activities. Furthermore, coordinating with school principals to accommodate participants' schedules reflects respect for teachers' time constraints and contributes to the smooth execution of the study.

The faces of the participants in the photos were obscured to ensure their privacy and protect their anonymity.

### 5. Findings

This subsection are the answers to the following research objective:

*The challenges faced by ESL teachers to implement Highly Immersive Program (HIP) for English language learning in rural schools.*

Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts to identify significant themes that emerged from the data. These themes were crucial in understanding the challenges faced by all participants. After a thorough analysis, four key themes were identified that best represented the respondents' experiences regarding the challenges ESL teachers encounter in implementing the HIP in rural schools. The themes identified were: "Limited Resources," "Lack of Parental Support," "Pupils' Low English Proficiency," and "Teachers' Heavy Workload."

Pseudonyms were assigned to the teachers, labeled as T1 through T15. Abbreviations were used to denote the Focus Group Interview (FGI).

#### 5.1 Challenge 1: Limited Resources

When respondents were asked about the challenges, they faced in implementing the HIP, all of them cited limited resources as one of the primary obstacles. The teachers unanimously identified the scarcity of resources as a significant barrier

to effectively implementing the HIP programme. They described the difficulties of working in a rural school environment where access to essential teaching materials, technology, and infrastructure is insufficient. The school library, for instance, has a limited collection of English books, particularly those suitable for varying reading levels, making it difficult to meet the diverse needs of all students. To address this gap, teachers often take initiative by creating their own materials, such as vocabulary flashcards and posters, to ensure their lessons are engaging and accessible.

Furthermore, poor internet connectivity at both the school and students' homes limits the ability to use online resources effectively. Despite their best efforts, integrating technology into lessons often proves impractical. Additionally, financial constraints and limited access to modern tools, such as audio-visual aids, restrict the full implementation of planned HIP activities, forcing teachers to improvise and adapt the resources available to them. These statements are reflected in the responses shown in Table 1:

**Table 1: Excerpts on Focus Group Interview Responses Regarding the Limited Resources**

R1 (FGI)	<i>"Well.. there are definitely challenges, especially in a rural school like ours. One big issue is the lack of resources. Our library doesn't have as many English books as we'd like, and it's hard to find materials at different reading levels. So, a lot of the time, we have to get creative. Teachers often make their own resources, like vocabulary flashcards or posters, just to make sure everyone has something to work with."</i>
R2 (FGI)	<i>"One of the main challenges is, the resources are limited. The access to teaching materials like books, audio-visual aids, and other resources is limited, which makes it harder to create an engaging learning environment. We often have bad internet connection issues here at school, and at the pupils' village. So it is not so practical to use online-based materials in every activity that we plan."</i>
R3 (FGI)	<i>"We also have to deal with limited resources. Sometimes, there may be constraints in terms of materials, funding, or access to technology, which can hinder the full execution of the planned activities."</i>

The statements mentioned above are supported by a photo of a HIP activity. Figure 1 illustrates a HIP activity in which the teacher utilizes only the available resources, specifically storybooks from the library. This type of activity does not require digital tools or an internet connection to be effectively implemented.



**Figure 1: Pupils read English storybook during assembly**

As highlighted by Harmer (2007), Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), Fayzulloyeva and Murzina (2022), and Mncube (2023), resource constraints are a major challenge in rural schools across many developing countries. Effective language teaching requires adequate materials and facilities, such as books, multimedia resources, and access to technology (Fayzulloyeva & Murzina, 2022). These challenges highlight the resilience and creativity of teachers, who work tirelessly to compensate for resource shortages. However, they also emphasize the critical need for greater support from the Parent-Teacher Association, the community, and school authorities—whether through funding, improved infrastructure, or access to high-quality learning materials—to better equip both teachers and students in rural schools.

#### Challenge 2: Lack of Parental Support

Besides the limited resources, the teachers also had to deal with the lack of parental support when they conducted HIP activities. One of the teachers (R8) highlighted during the FGI, *“We have limited parental or community involvement. To encourage consistent involvement from parents and the community is challenging to us, particularly when they have busy schedules or limited awareness of the program’s value.”* In conclusion, the inconsistent involvement of parents and the community presents a significant barrier to the collaborative efforts necessary for the success of HIP activities. This includes challenges in supporting students' learning at home and participating in school programs. While some parents show interest, their busy schedules and limited understanding of the program's importance often prevent sustained engagement.

Similarly, fostering community involvement is challenging due to competing priorities and a lack of clarity on how they can effectively contribute to the program. As noted by Catherine et al. (2020), parental involvement is critical for reinforcing language skills taught in school, yet it is often limited in rural areas. Many parents in these rural schools lack the language proficiency or educational background needed to support their children's English learning. This lack of involvement can significantly impede students' progress and diminish the overall effectiveness of HIP.

### Challenge 3: Pupils' Low English Proficiency

Another challenge faced by ESL teachers in implementing HIP in schools is the low English proficiency of pupils. According to Bitty (2017), rural students often have limited access to English media, extracurricular activities, and community programs that could enhance their language learning. This restricted exposure outside the classroom results in fewer opportunities for students to practice and develop their English skills, which are crucial for achieving proficiency.

2) Cabaran Guru BI dalam Pelaksanaan HIP

2.1 Apakah cabaran utama yang anda (sebagai guru BI) hadapi dalam melaksanakan HIP?

1 response

Kebanyakan pelajar mempunyai tahap penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris yang rendah, menyebabkan mereka malu atau takut untuk berkomunikasi.

**Figure 2: Screenshot of respondent's answer on Google Form**

According to the data collected from the Google Form (refer to Figure 2), one of the respondents responded that, *'Most pupils have low English proficiency level, causing them to feel shy or scared to communicate'*.

The respondents identified low motivation and engagement among pupils as a significant challenge in implementing HIP activities (see Table 1). This issue is influenced by factors such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, language barriers, and diverse learning needs. English is rarely spoken or heard outside of school in rural communities, making it difficult for pupils to retain what they have learned during HIP sessions. This lack of exposure not only affects their retention but also contributes to their hesitation and shyness in using English. Pupils often feel self-conscious about making mistakes, which discourages their participation in activities such as public speaking. Furthermore, many pupils struggle to see the relevance of learning English in their everyday lives, which negatively impacts their motivation.

Another challenge identified is the language barrier, as most pupils and parents come from non-English-speaking backgrounds. This situation makes it more difficult for pupils to follow or engage in activities, leading to low self-confidence and motivation. The fear of making mistakes often prevents them from participating in group or public speaking activities, further limiting their engagement with the program. Maintaining consistent participation and motivation is particularly challenging for activities that require collaboration or critical thinking. While some pupils are enthusiastic, others struggle to stay engaged, especially when tasks are complex or demanding. Additionally, the diverse learning needs of pupils add another layer of complexity, making it difficult to ensure inclusive and equitable opportunities for all students. These challenges are supported by the following interview responses from the Focus Group Interview (FGI).

**Table 1: Respondents' interview responses on 'pupils' low English proficiency**

R9 (FGI)	<i>"Another challenge is that English isn't commonly used outside school. So, when students go home, they're not hearing or speaking English, which makes it tough for them to retain what they've learned. It can also make them hesitant or shy about using English, especially if they feel self-conscious about making mistakes. And, in a rural area like ours, it's sometimes hard for students to see the relevance of learning English, which can affect their motivation."</i>
R13 (FGI)	<i>"We also face this language barrier issue where most pupils, and even parents come from non-English-speaking backgrounds, making it harder for them to follow or participate in activities. This factor also affects their motivation and it makes them feel shy or afraid of making mistakes, which affects their willingness to participate in public speaking or group activities."</i>
R11 (FGI)	<i>"Implementing the HIP comes with several challenges, which include limited student participation or motivation. While some students are motivated, some may find it challenging to stay engaged, especially in activities that require extensive collaboration or critical thinking. With a diverse group of students, meeting the different learning needs and ensuring inclusivity for all can be a complex task."</i>

Challenge 4: Teachers' Heavy Workload associated with Planning and Executing HIP Activities.

Another significant challenge identified by the teachers is the issue of time constraints and the heavy workload they face, which affects the effective implementation of HIP activities. Given that HIP is implemented year-round, teachers must navigate their packed schedules and limited time to organize and carry out the necessary activities.

Figure 3 shows teachers and pupils painting the wall together as part of the HIP program. This activity required teachers to allocate time, resources, and energy to effectively implement the HIP activities.



**Figure 3: Photos of teachers and pupils painting English words on the wall**

As educators, teachers assume multiple roles and responsibilities, which makes it difficult to dedicate sufficient time and energy to the program (see Table 2). The packed school timetable, combined with the numerous duties teachers must fulfill, presents a significant time management challenge. Teachers must carefully navigate their commitments to ensure all planned HIP activities are executed. Balancing these additional duties with their regular teaching responsibilities often leaves limited time for preparation and follow-up on HIP-related tasks. In addition to their teaching roles, teachers are required to take on various administrative responsibilities, such as serving as class teachers, PBD coordinators, PIBG secretaries, and heads of panels for specific subjects.

These responsibilities substantially increase their workload, leaving little time to focus on the detailed planning and implementation of HIP activities. The juggling of these tasks often results in teachers feeling overburdened and unable to devote their full efforts to the program. This excessive workload aligns with the critical challenge noted by Lumadi (2008) and Adams and Lok (2022), who found that teachers are generally overwhelmed with work, limiting their creativity in other areas. These findings also echo Ding's (2024) assertion that heavy workload pressure contributes to teachers' psychological ill-being. These conclusions are supported by the following evidence.

**Table 2: Respondents' answers on 'teachers' heavy workload' issue**

R2 (FGI)	<i>"As a teacher, we also face time constraint issues. With an already packed school timetable, and so many responsibilities at school, finding time for HIP activities can be a challenge. We have to manage our time wisely and make sure that all teachers are able to commit to all activities that we have planned."</i>
R3 (FGI)	<i>"On our part, as teachers, we do have issues with our workload. As teacher, we already hold so many responsibilities such as being the class teacher, PBD coordinator, secretary of PIBG, head panel of certain subjects, and so on. So, this makes it very challenging for us to implement the HIP activities."</i>

Table 3 below summarizes all the key findings of the present study.

**Table 3: Summary of Findings**

Challenge	Key Issues	Supporting Evidence (Quotes & Observations)	Impact
Limited Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Insufficient English books &amp; teaching materials.</li> <li>-Poor internet connectivity.</li> <li>-Lack of funding for audio-visual aids.</li> </ul>	<p>R1 (FGI): "Teachers make their own flashcards/posters due to lack of books."            R2 (FGI): "Bad internet limits online-based activities."            Figure 1: Pupils rely on printed storybooks.</p>	Teachers improvise materials; limits interactive learning.
Lack of Parental Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Low awareness of HIP's importance.</li> <li>-Parents' busy schedules/language barriers.</li> <li>-Minimal community involvement.</li> </ul>	<p>R8 (FGI): "Parents have limited involvement due to busy schedules."            Catherine et al. (2020): Rural parents lack English proficiency to assist.</p>	Reduced reinforcement of English at home; weak school-community collaboration.
Pupils' Low English Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited exposure to English outside school.</li> <li>- Fear of mistakes leads to low participation.</li> <li>- Lack of motivation (perceived irrelevance).</li> </ul>	<p>Figure 2 (Google Form): "Pupils feel shy to communicate."            R9 (FGI): "Pupils don't retain English without daily practice."            R13 (FGI): "Non-English backgrounds hinder engagement."</p>	Low confidence; reluctance in speaking activities.
Teachers' Heavy Workload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Multiple roles (admin, teaching, HIP planning).</li> <li>-Time constraints due to packed schedules.</li> <li>-Financial/energy costs for HIP activities.</li> </ul>	<p>R2 (FGI): "Finding time for HIP is challenging."            R3 (FGI): "Teachers juggle roles like PBD coordinator, PIBG secretary."            Figure 3: Teachers invest extra time/money in HIP (e.g., wall painting).</p>	Burnout; compromises HIP implementation quality.

## 6. Discussion

The researchers investigated the challenges faced by ESL teachers in implementing the Highly Immersive Program (HIP) for English language learning in rural schools in Malaysia. The findings identified four key challenges: limited resources, lack of parental support, pupils' low proficiency in English, and the heavy workload of teachers. These insights not only corroborate the findings of previous studies but also offer a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced in rural school settings.

"Limited resources" were identified as one of the most significant challenges. Teachers discussed how the lack of essential materials, unreliable internet access, and insufficient funding made it difficult to establish effective learning environments. As Harmer (2007) emphasizes, successful language teaching depends on having appropriate tools, such as books and technology. Erlinda and Melor (2019) also highlighted that rural schools frequently face severe resource limitations, particularly in terms of internet accessibility, compelling teachers to create their own materials. While their creativity is commendable, it further exacerbates their already heavy workload and restricts the variety of HIP activities they can implement.

The "lack of parental support" emerged as another significant challenge. Teachers pointed out that many parents, often due to their own limited English proficiency or a lack of awareness regarding the program's importance, are unable to actively support their children's learning. This lack of involvement hinders pupils' ability to practice English outside of school and undermines the collaborative efforts necessary for HIP's success. The findings of this study align with those of Renganathan (2021), who highlighted that rural parents often provide minimal support in assisting their children with schoolwork at home. Additionally, efforts to engage parents are further complicated by their busy schedules and competing priorities.

The issue of pupils' low English proficiency, particularly in rural areas, is a multifaceted challenge that affects their confidence and willingness to engage in language activities. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom, combined with language barriers faced by both pupils and their parents, contributes to a lack of confidence and a fear of making mistakes. This apprehension often discourages students from participating in activities such as public speaking. Teachers have observed that without regular opportunities to use English in their daily lives, pupils struggle to recognize its value, which diminishes their motivation to improve their proficiency. These findings corroborate the research by Idrus (2021), who identified language classroom anxiety among rural students in Malaysia, stemming from the minimal use of English in both formal and informal settings.

These observations are consistent with the findings of Dornyei (2019) on the L2 Motivational Self System and Matiso (2024). According to Dornyei, pupils are more motivated to learn and improve their English when they can envision themselves effectively using it in real-life situations. Matiso (2024) further

emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive ESL classrooms, which offer inclusive and supportive environments that foster motivation and engagement by incorporating cultural relevance and real-world connections. Additionally, pupils are more likely to be motivated to improve their English when they perceive the skills as essential to meet external expectations and avoid negative outcomes (Zainal et al., 2024). In contexts where English proficiency is associated with academic or career success, this perception can be a strong motivating factor (Cayubit, 2022). Furthermore, the immediate learning environment and experiences also play a significant role in student motivation. Positive interactions and opportunities to use English both at school and at home enhance student engagement in the language learning process (Seo, 2025). These findings highlight the emotional and cognitive barriers learners face while supporting the need to create meaningful and effective language learning experiences aligned with the goals of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP).

"Pupils' low English proficiency" emerged as a recurring challenge in this study. Many pupils have limited exposure to English outside of school, and both pupils and parents often face significant language barriers (Alonso, 2022). This lack of exposure leads to a lack of confidence and a fear of making mistakes, which discourages pupils from participating in activities such as public speaking (Leyaley, 2023). Teachers observed that without opportunities to use English in their daily lives, pupils struggle to see its relevance, which makes it harder for them to improve their proficiency.

These findings align with Dörnyei's (2019) research, which emphasizes that real-world learning experiences are crucial for motivating language learners. Similarly, Hennebry-Leung and Xiao (2020) found that traits like conscientiousness and openness to new experiences are important predictors of English learning motivation. Furthermore, pupils are more likely to be motivated to learn a language when they feel comfortable in their learning environment (Ramzan, 2023). There is also a positive trend for learners to integrate more fully into the target language learning community when they feel at ease.

The fourth challenge identified was the 'teachers' heavy workload.' Teachers reported that their numerous responsibilities, ranging from administrative tasks to managing extracurricular activities, left them with little time to plan and execute HIP activities effectively. This issue reflects broader challenges faced by rural teachers and aligns with Smith's (2020) findings, which suggest that excessive workload can significantly diminish teaching quality and hinder program effectiveness. To make HIP activities more manageable, teachers require better support, including improved task distribution and access to additional resources.

The Highly Immersive Program (HIP) is a valuable initiative aimed at improving English language proficiency in rural primary schools. However, for HIP to realize its full potential, it requires systemic support and collaboration from all stakeholders. Key areas for improvement include enhancing resource allocation, fostering stronger parental and community engagement, and addressing

structural challenges such as teacher workload and infrastructure. By addressing these critical issues, HIP can continue to create immersive learning environments that bridge gaps in language education and provide meaningful opportunities for growth in rural settings.

## 7. Conclusion

The researchers examined the challenges encountered by ESL teachers in implementing the Highly Immersive Program (HIP) for English language learning in rural schools in Malaysia. The study identified four primary challenges: limited resources, lack of parental support, pupils' low proficiency in English, and teachers' heavy workload related to the planning and execution of HIP activities. These findings not only reinforce conclusions from previous studies but also provide a deeper understanding of the specific struggles faced in the context of rural schools in Malaysia.

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