

What Helps Us Teach Here: Motivational and Contextual Factors Supporting EFL Teachers in Rural Vietnam

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This study explores the factors that facilitate the professional practice of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers working in rural areas of Vietnam. Drawing on a phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with rural EFL teachers across multiple provinces. The analysis identified four interrelated facilitators that support teachers' work and professional identities: (1) teaching enjoyment and positive teacher-student relationships, which nurture a sense of purpose and emotional fulfilment; (2) a supportive work environment, including collegial solidarity and administrative understanding; (3) access to professional development and opportunities for career growth, which enhance competence and sustain long-term motivation; and (4) economic and emotional rewards from extra/private tutoring, which mitigate financial pressure and create a sense of stability. Framed through Self-Determination Theory, Positive psychology and Sociocultural perspectives, the findings show that these facilitators collectively contribute to teachers' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, enabling them to sustain professional commitment despite challenging rural conditions. The study highlights the value of recognising and strengthening existing local assets to improve teacher retention and instructional quality in rural Vietnamese schools.

Keywords: facilitator, EFL teacher, Vietnam, rural, lived experience

Introduction

Teacher quality is widely recognised as a crucial factor shaping educational outcomes, yet teachers working in rural and remote regions often face working conditions that differ substantially from those in urban areas. International research shows that rural teachers frequently contend with limited instructional resources, heavy workloads, restricted professional development opportunities, and high levels of work-related stress (Şahin, Soyulu, & Jafari, 2022; Hardman & Sandi, 2024; Huo, 2025). These constraints not only influence instructional quality but also shape teachers' motivation, identities, and retention.

In Vietnam, similar patterns have been documented. Studies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching highlight systemic challenges including curriculum overload, the dominance of high-stakes examinations, inadequate training opportunities, and persistent disparities between rural and urban schools (Pham, 2021; Phuong et. al, 2025; Tú, Dung, & Lan Anh, 2025). Research focusing specifically on rural educational contexts points to issues such as poor teaching facilities, limited English exposure, students' low proficiency, and in-

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sufficient access to professional development (Nguyen et.al, 2024). Consequently, much of the existing scholarship portrays rural EFL teaching primarily through a deficit lens, centring on barriers and constraints.

While these studies make an important contribution, scholars have warned that exclusive challenge-focus creates one-sided, partial accounts of rural teachers' work, by ignoring strengths like community ties or innovative practices (Gallo, 2020). Emerging research in teacher resilience and positive psychology in second language acquisition (SLA) emphasizes contextual factors like school culture, colleague relationships, and student interactions as socio-contextual influences on teacher wellbeing (Sulis et. al, 2024). Studies in rural education also suggest that teachers often draw on local knowledge, community connections, and intrinsic motivation to overcome contextual constraints (Leach & Bradbury, 2024). However, in Vietnam, empirical work that systematically examines facilitators of rural EFL teachers' professional practice remains scarce. Supportive factors are typically mentioned only briefly or embedded within broader discussions of challenges rather than being treated as a central analytical focus.

Addressing this gap is important for two reasons. First, identifying facilitators provides a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of rural teachers' lived experiences beyond deficit-oriented narratives. Second, insights into existing strengths can inform more context-sensitive policies and interventions, especially as Vietnam continues efforts to enhance the quality of English education under the National Foreign Languages Project.

To respond to this gap, the present study investigates the factors that facilitate the professional practice of EFL teachers in rural areas of Vietnam. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study foregrounds teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, offering a nuanced account of the enabling conditions embedded within their professional contexts. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and sociocultural perspectives (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009) inform the analysis, providing a framework for understanding how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported in rural settings.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question:

1. *What facilitators to their professional practice do EFL teachers in rural areas of Vietnam perceive or encounter?*

The article proceeds with a review of literature on rural EFL teaching, followed by an outline of the methodology. The findings are then presented across four thematic facilitators, and the article concludes with a discussion of implications for teacher development and educational policy.

Literature Review

Rural Education Context

Rural education worldwide faces persistent challenges that affect both teachers and students. Rural schools often operate under constrained conditions, including limited financial and teaching resources, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to technology and internet connectivity (Monk, 2007; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). Teachers in these areas frequently manage multiple subjects and responsibilities, often working in isolation without sufficient professional support or training. These challenges contribute to lower student achievement and limited learning opportunities compared to urban counterparts, particularly in subjects requiring high levels of language exposure, such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Teacher shortages in rural regions are a global concern. In many countries, rural schools struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers due to factors such as geographic isolation, limited professional development op-

portunities, and lower salaries (Monk, 2007; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). The lack of qualified teachers can exacerbate educational inequities, as students are often taught by instructors who may not have specialized training in specific subjects.

Student outcomes in rural schools are closely linked to these systemic constraints. Research consistently shows rural students generally have more limited exposure to second languages than urban peers, driven by resource disparities, fewer qualified instructors, and reduced extracurricular opportunities (Sridhar & Lourembam, 2025). In addition, rural learners' access to learning resources, parental support, and opportunities for authentic language use is often limited, which negatively affects their motivation and language competence.

In Vietnam, rural-urban disparities in education are particularly pronounced. Schools in rural areas face challenges related to staffing, curriculum implementation, teaching resources, and infrastructure. Rural students in Vietnam often demonstrate lower English proficiency due to limited exposure to the language in and outside school (Pham, 2021). Large class sizes, shortages of qualified English teachers, and curriculum constraints hinder teachers' ability to implement interactive, communicative approaches (Vu, 2024). Local conditions, including inadequate facilities and instructional materials, and limited parental engagement, further shape the teaching and learning environment in rural schools (Bui, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025).

Understanding these contextual factors is essential for examining the professional experiences of English language teachers in rural Vietnam. Teachers must navigate multiple constraints while fostering students' language learning, often relying on personal motivation, creativity, and community connections to overcome systemic challenges. Considering the global and Vietnamese perspectives provides a comprehensive backdrop for investigating how rural English teachers negotiate these complex educational contexts.

EFL Teaching in Vietnam

English language teaching in Vietnam has undergone substantial transformation over the past two decades, driven by national economic reforms, globalization, and the government's recognition of English as a key driver of international integration. However, despite ambitious policies such as the National Foreign Languages Project (NFLP), the realities of classroom teaching, particularly in rural areas, continue to reflect deep systemic challenges that shape teachers' professional practice.

One overarching issue concerns the dominance of high-stakes testing and a curriculum that remains heavily exam-oriented. As Dang & Norris (2024) note, English instruction in Vietnam is largely shaped by grammar-based examinations that prioritize accuracy, form, and test-taking strategies over communicative competence. This exam-driven culture leaves teachers with limited autonomy and constrains their ability to implement interactive or student-centered pedagogies. For rural teachers, who often work with students of lower proficiency and reduced exposure to English, the pressure of preparing learners for high-stakes tests can be particularly overwhelming.

At the same time, many English teachers, especially those in rural settings, face constraints in accessing meaningful professional development. Although national initiatives aim to enhance teacher quality, research indicates that training programs often remain theoretical, short-term, or insufficiently contextualized for rural needs. Rural teachers frequently report limited opportunities for sustained mentorship, peer collaboration, or in-service workshops that address their specific challenges, such as large mixed-ability classes, limited instructional time, and students' low English input outside school (Nguyen & Phan, 2025).

Access to teaching materials and digital technology represents another major barrier. While urban schools increasingly benefit from multimedia equipment, internet-based resources, and updated textbooks, rural schools often lack basic facilities such as functional projectors, language labs, or reliable internet connectivity

(Nhu, Keong & Wah, 2024). Teaching materials may be outdated or insufficient in quantity, and teachers have few opportunities to supplement them with authentic resources. These material shortcomings reduce the effectiveness of communicative teaching methods and limit students' exposure to naturalistic English input.

Teacher-student interactions also reflect contextual tensions. Rural students frequently exhibit low confidence, limited vocabulary, and minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, making communication-oriented tasks challenging. Numerous studies indicate that Vietnamese students, particularly in rural areas, hesitate to speak English due to fear of errors, amplified by exam-oriented teaching that stresses accuracy over fluency (Khanh & Ngoc, 2022). Motivation is shaped by socioeconomic factors, as rural students often prioritize employment-ready subjects and “mainly rely on formal language education at school” because English seems less relevant to their local context (Pham, 2021, p. 41).

Collectively, these challenges highlight the complex and resource-constrained environment in which rural EFL teachers in Vietnam work. Existing research predominantly emphasizes structural and pedagogical obstacles, leaving a gap in understanding the positive, enabling factors that support teacher resilience, competence development, and professional identity. By exploring teachers' lived experiences, particularly what sustains and motivates them, this study contributes to a more balanced and holistic understanding of rural EFL teaching in Vietnam.

Theories of Teacher Motivation, Teacher Resilience and Positive Psychology

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a foundational framework for understanding teacher motivation. SDT posits that individuals experience optimal motivation when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy (a sense of volition), competence (feeling effective), and relatedness (a sense of belonging and connection). In language education, these needs influence teachers' engagement, persistence, and instructional creativity. When contextual factors support these needs (through collegial support, meaningful professional development, and positive interactions with students), teachers are more likely to demonstrate intrinsic motivation, professional satisfaction, and sustained commitment to their work. Conversely, environments characterized by rigid curriculum demands, limited resources, and social isolation can undermine internal motivation and contribute to burnout.

Sociocultural perspectives, rooted in the work of Vygotsky and extended in applied linguistics by Lantolf and Beckett (2009), emphasize that learning and professional practice are inherently social and contextually mediated. From this perspective, teachers' knowledge, skills, and professional identities are not developed in isolation but emerge through interactions with students, colleagues, administrators, and the broader community. In the context of rural EFL teaching in Vietnam, sociocultural theory (SCT) provides a lens for understanding how facilitators, such as collegial support, community engagement, and collaborative problem-solving, are embedded within social and institutional structures. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, this study applies a sociocultural approach to examine how relational and contextual factors enable teachers to sustain motivation, exercise autonomy, and enact effective teaching practices despite the constraints of rural educational environments.

Complementing SDT and SCT, recent scholarship in applied linguistics and educational psychology has turned toward teacher resilience and positive psychology to understand how teachers navigate adversity. Mercer and MacIntyre (2014) introduce positive psychology to second language acquisition (SLA) by highlighting character strengths (e.g., resilience, grit), positive emotions (e.g., enjoyment), and well-being models to counter deficit-focused research and foster flourishing amid challenges. These studies suggest that teachers' emotional experiences, such as enjoyment, confidence, and a sense of professional growth, play a critical role

in sustaining their instructional practices. Resilience is conceptualized not as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic process shaped by personal attributes and environmental affordances, including supportive leadership, collegial networks, and constructive teacher-student relationships.

Integrating SDT, SCT, positive psychology, and resilience research provides the conceptual foundation for the present study, which seeks to explore the facilitators, rather than only the challenges, that support professional practice among EFL teachers in rural Vietnam.

Facilitators of Teacher Practice

Understanding what enables teachers to thrive has increasingly become an important area in teacher research. In this study, “facilitators” refer to *the supportive conditions, personal resources, relational dynamics, and contextual affordances* that help teachers sustain their professional practice. These may arise from the external work environment (e.g., supportive colleagues, availability of resources), interpersonal relationships (e.g., positive interactions with students, mentors, and administrators), or internal psychological factors (e.g., intrinsic motivation, sense of purpose, professional identity). The concept of facilitators is closely related to positive psychology, which identifies several key factors that enable effective teaching amid adversity, including resilience, positive emotions, character strengths, self-efficacy, and supportive relationships (Mercer & MacIntyre, 2014). In rural settings in particular, these factors often compensate for structural disadvantages such as limited resources, isolation, or institutional constraints.

Facilitators to teachers’ professional practice may include supportive professional relationships, such as collegiality, mentorship, and encouragement from school administrators. Resource-based supports also play a role, including adequate teaching materials and access to meaningful professional development opportunities. In addition, psychological factors, such as intrinsic enjoyment of teaching, a strong sense of competence, self-efficacy, and resilience, help sustain teachers’ motivation and effectiveness. Finally, student-related motivators, including positive interactions with learners, visible student progress, and supportive community values, further contribute to a favourable teaching environment. These dimensions collectively shape how teachers navigate and sustain their work, particularly in settings where external conditions may be less favourable.

Several key factors consistently emerge as crucial in supporting and sustaining teachers, particularly in challenging environments. Chief among these is strong collegial and community support. Azano and Stewart (2015) noted that in rural U.S. contexts, the supportive relationships among colleagues and the familiarity found in tight-knit communities helped teachers feel valued. This sense of belonging effectively counterbalanced the difficulties of professional and geographic isolation. Equally motivating are positive teacher-student relationships. Marotz and Lawson (2007) suggest that professional recognition is a key factor in teacher commitment, whereas those who perceive themselves as undervalued are significantly more likely to exit the field. For rural educators, this is often compounded by a deep sense of community connection and relational closeness with students, which Tieken (2014) identifies as a sustaining element of their daily work.

In a global systematic review, Yang et al. (2024) examined the diverse factors that impact the career decisions of rural educators across different regions. Their analysis categorized the drivers of teacher retention into six primary domains: individual traits, domestic circumstances, classroom and student dynamics, the organizational culture of the school, integration within the local community, and the availability of social support.

While international scholarship has begun to document enablers of teacher practice, research in Vietnam has primarily focused on challenges, such as resource shortages, large mixed-ability classes, limited English exposure, and exam-oriented teaching requirements. Existing studies tend to emphasize systemic barriers and

professional struggles rather than what helps teachers thrive. Understanding facilitators can contribute to more balanced, strength-based analyses of teachers' lived experiences. It can also support policy development aimed not only at alleviating difficulties but also at reinforcing the positive conditions that help rural EFL teachers succeed. Thus, examining facilitators in Vietnam's rural EFL context serves an important function: it brings into view the resources, strategies, and relational dynamics that enable teacher agency and professional flourishing, thereby addressing a largely unexplored dimension of rural English-language education.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

The participants include EFL teachers at the primary, secondary, and high school levels. They are natives of remote regions of Vietnam. Their ages range from 24, with a minimum of two years of teaching experience, to 49, with a maximum of 27 years of teaching experience. The participants included 20 teachers from provincial areas and 4 from mountainous regions; 21 were female and 3 were male. Participant recruitment involved collaboration with educational institutions. Specifically, the researchers partnered with local schools or educational organizations in rural Vietnam, and worked with school administrators and educational authorities to obtain permission and assistance in reaching out to EFL teachers in these regions.

The participants who are English teachers from rural areas across Vietnam were contacted and provided with an Information and Consent sheet, along with documents for data processing permission. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and participants could withdraw at any time. Interviews were planned face-to-face but, due to geographical distances, many were conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of the study details, and with their consent, signed the forms either in person or via email. Interviews were audio-recorded with prior notice and later transcribed for coding.

To explore the perspectives of EFL teachers in rural Vietnam using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This method, common in qualitative research, uses a set of open-ended questions (topic guide) while allowing flexibility for new themes to emerge (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010). Participants first answered demographic questions (e.g., age, teaching experience, education, school location) and background questions (e.g., teaching load, grade level) to provide context. The researchers also shared brief personal information to build rapport.

After establishing rapport and collecting demographic information, the interview proceeded to more detailed questions concerning participants' professional lives. These questions explored the nature of their daily work, their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and school leaders, and their broader experiences within the rural school environment.

Following the contextual questions, the interview moved to more direct prompts focusing on teachers' subjective experiences in their rural teaching contexts. Participants were asked what they enjoyed most about their work as well as the difficulties they encountered in rural schools. These questions were designed to elicit personal reflections on both the positive and challenging dimensions of their professional lives, encouraging participants to articulate their feelings, motivations, and struggles in their own words. This stage of the interview provided rich, experiential data that contributed to a deeper understanding of how teachers made sense of their lived experiences in rural settings.

Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis as outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2019) was used to analyse the semi-structured interview data. The study adopts a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, in which themes are actively generated through the researcher's interpretative engagement with the data. This approach aligns with the phenomenological aim of exploring participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. The researchers first transcribed the interviews verbatim and repeatedly read the transcripts to immerse in the data and identify recurring patterns, key points, and noteworthy responses. During this process, the researchers focused not only on what participants said but also on the meanings underlying their descriptions of teaching in rural contexts.

Coding was conducted inductively, allowing concepts and patterns of meaning to be identified directly from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Codes were gradually developed to capture significant aspects of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of their professional lives in rural Vietnam. Similar codes were grouped into broader themes that represented shared patterns of meaning across participants' lived experiences.

Consistent with a reflexive thematic analysis approach, theme development was an interpretative process in which the researchers actively engaged with the data to construct meaningful patterns rather than simply identifying surface-level topics. The researchers continuously reflected on how personal perspectives and prior knowledge might influence interpretation. To maintain analytical rigor, the researchers attempted to bracket prior assumptions and remain attentive to participants' own descriptions and meanings throughout the analysis.

The researchers then interpreted the data within each theme, exploring nuances, variations, and richness in teachers' experiences. Cross-case comparisons were conducted to ensure credibility and consistency, identifying recurring patterns as well as unique perspectives. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a coherent narrative, illustrated with quotes from participants to validate interpretations and demonstrate how themes were grounded in teachers' lived experiences.

Findings

After data analysis, four main themes are emerged: *teaching enjoyment and student relations*; *supportive work environment*; *professional development and career growth*; *economic and emotional rewards from extra/private tutoring*. These favourable conditions make their work easier or more effective.

Sub-themes	Main themes
Teaching English is inherently interesting; Nice, respectful, polite, sincere, and obedient students; Teachers derive happiness from supporting students Empathy for students' disadvantages as a source of teacher motivation Student engagement stemming from resource constraints	Teaching enjoyment and student relations
Supportive leaders Good co-workers Supportive working environment Lower cost of living as a contributor to teachers' work-life balance Supportive natural and environmental conditions Less demanding parental and institutional expectations	Supportive work environment
Professional development opportunities Better coursebooks Positive innovations from the government	Professional development and career growth
Financial benefits from tutoring and extra classes Freedom and happiness in extra/private tutoring classes	Economic and emotional rewards from extra/private tutoring

Table 1. Facilitators to their professional practice for EFL teachers in rural Vietnam

Teaching Enjoyment and Student Relations

A prominent positive experience for EFL teachers in rural schools is the enjoyment derived from teaching, closely linked to interactions with students. In this study, teaching enjoyment and student interactions are merged into a single theme, as children naturally motivate teachers and bring daily joy.

Many teachers expressed satisfaction in witnessing students' progress, particularly as they gradually gain confidence and actively participate in English lessons. As Khuong noted, students initially hesitant to speak gradually became more confident and engaged, which she described as *"incredibly rewarding."* Similarly, Tap highlighted the warmth of student-teacher relationships: students often check on teachers' well-being and are treated almost like family.

Teachers also experience pride when students show curiosity, ask questions, and demonstrate learning growth, reinforcing teachers' professional commitment. Tan reflected, *"Even if I can help my students grasp just a small piece of knowledge, it brings me joy to see them motivated and understand the meaning of learning."*

The presence of nice and obedient students further enhances this sense of fulfillment, as it fosters a positive classroom atmosphere where teachers feel respected and valued. Rural communities often emphasize values such as respect for authority and strong family ties. These cultural norms can lead to students exhibiting more polite and obedient behavior towards teachers. Mienobserved, *"Most students in rural areas are friendly, respectful, and well-behaved toward their teachers,"* while Lan added that school violence is less common than in urban areas.

Besides being respectful, a sincere and caring nature is also prominent qualities of rural students. Participants observed that many students come from simple farming families, which shapes their honesty and politeness. One teacher noted, *"Most students in rural areas are well-behaved, honest, and polite"* (Kim). Another

shared “Most students come from humble farming families, which also shapes their personalities - simple and sincere” (Hau). A third teacher added, “students here are more affectionate, polite, and respectful toward teachers. If a student’s family has vegetables, they often give them to the teacher; when the teacher speaks, the students listen and follow instructions.” Such behaviours foster positive teacher-student interactions, increase teachers’ professional satisfaction, and motivate them to invest further in their teaching.

Additionally, the dynamic and interactive nature of language teaching, incorporating storytelling, communicative activities, and real-life tasks, adds to teachers’ enjoyment. Tan explained that applying new pedagogical approaches to engage students brought her “great joy” and reinforced her sense of making a difference.

A significant factor supporting teachers’ professional motivation is their compassion for students, especially their awareness of the disadvantages rural learners face in accessing English-learning materials and supportive learning environments. One participant (Tap) shared that their “love for students grows stronger, especially because they are so deprived of learning resources,” which in turn fuels a personal passion to improve teaching quality and provide students with “the most accessible ways to learn.” This empathy transforms hardship into motivation, as teachers perceive students’ challenges as opportunities to refine their own practice and further develop their professional competence.

Another facilitator identified is the heightened student engagement in rural classrooms, which, surprisingly, stems from the lack of technology. Participants noted that rural students often have limited access to information technology and extracurricular learning opportunities, so when teachers incorporate technology into lessons or introduce new concepts, students respond with remarkable enthusiasm. One teacher shared, “Rural students have less access to information technology than urban students, so when I use technology in my lessons, they get much more excited” (Kim). Another added, “The knowledge I teach opens up new horizons for them because they don’t have the opportunity to attend extra classes like in the city. Most of the words they know come mainly from the teacher” (Lan). This high level of student curiosity and appreciation not only energizes teachers but also inspires them to continually improve their instructional practice.

Overall, these emotional connections with students not only strengthen teachers’ passion for teaching but also sustain their commitment despite the challenges of working in rural contexts. These accounts reveal that emotional fulfillment derived from student engagement plays a vital role in shaping teachers’ day-to-day teaching experiences.

Supportive Work Environment

A supportive work environment is crucial for shaping the professional experiences of EFL teachers in rural Vietnam. Many teachers receive encouragement and guidance from school leaders and colleagues, helping them navigate the challenges of rural teaching. School leaders play a central role by setting realistic expectations, recognizing teachers’ efforts, fostering professional growth, and providing opportunities for training and development. As Hao noted, her school “promotes a positive and supportive atmosphere...creating opportunities for teachers to pursue professional development, participate in training programs, and take part in various projects.”

Supportive leadership often extends beyond administrative duties. For instance, Mien described her principal as a mentor who fostered a strong sense of community and advocated for teachers’ rights, ensuring favorable working conditions. Recognizing the importance of English, school administrations also encourage language initiatives, organize competitions, and create opportunities for students to use English, enhancing engagement and teaching effectiveness (Lan).

Collaboration with colleagues further strengthens this supportive environment. Teachers benefit from sharing experiences, exchanging strategies, and receiving emotional encouragement. Huy described her workplace as “*young and dynamic*,” while Sanh noted that colleagues treat each other “*like family, supportive, united, and always willing to help one another*.” The cooperative nature of rural schools, often reinforced by fewer staff and stable teaching positions, reduces competition and fosters camaraderie (Huong).

Several participants noted that the lower cost of living in rural areas serves as a supportive factor that helps them maintain balance in their personal and professional lives. Teachers shared that daily expenses, such as food, housing, and transportation, are significantly more manageable compared to urban centres. One teacher explained, “*In rural areas, the cost of living is lower, so it’s easier for me to maintain a balanced life and I don’t face too much financial pressure*” (Khuong). This reduced financial burden allows teachers to focus more on their teaching responsibilities and overall well-being, contributing positively to their professional sustainability.

Participants also highlighted the rural environment as a facilitator that enhances their teaching experience. The clean air, peaceful surroundings, and absence of heavy traffic contribute to a sense of physical and psychological comfort. As one teacher described, “*The environment here is healthy, the air is fresh, and there is no traffic pressure like in the city*” (Kim). Such environmental qualities help teachers feel more relaxed and energised, which they believe supports their ability to perform effectively in the classroom and maintain long-term commitment to their profession.

Participants described the rural teaching environment as one in which they were subject to limited evaluation based on students’ examination results and faced little expectation to compete for high scores. Participants also reported that parents generally held modest academic expectations for their children and were minimally involved in monitoring academic achievement, resulting in little pressure on teachers to produce outstanding results. In addition, competition among teachers was described as largely absent, as student scores were not used to compare or rank teachers within the school. As one participant noted, “*There aren’t many expectations from parents or the school leaders, and we don’t have to compete or chase high scores*,” while another explained, “*Here, I’m not under pressure to achieve high test scores, so I can teach more comfortably and don’t constantly worry about exam results*.” Such relaxed expectations allow teachers to focus on meaningful teaching, exercise professional autonomy, and maintain well-being, making it easier to sustain commitment and creativity in their instructional practice.

Overall, a positive work environment, characterized by supportive leadership, collegiality, and collaborative practices, not only enhances teacher well-being but also sustains professional commitment. In rural contexts, where teachers may face isolation and limited resources, such institutional and social support is vital for maintaining motivation and passion for teaching.

Professional Development and Career Growth

In recent years, Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has emphasized educational reform, particularly to enhance English language teaching. Central to this effort is the introduction of updated English textbooks across all levels, allowing schools to select materials suited to their context. Teachers viewed these reforms positively, noting that the new textbooks are thematically organized, streamlined, and designed to develop students’ real-life communication skills (Khuong; Huong; Lan).

Alongside new materials, comprehensive teacher training programs support educators in implementing updated curricula effectively. These sessions familiarize teachers with content, strategies, and assessment methods, enhancing pedagogical skills, confidence, and instructional effectiveness. Teachers also value opportunit-

ies for collaboration and peer observation, such as monthly teaching demonstrations, model lessons, and provincial workshops, which foster professional growth and a sense of community (Khuong; Huong).

Beyond technical training, teachers emphasized the importance of networking with colleagues across schools and districts. Khương highlighted that these meetings provide “*great opportunities to connect with fellow educators,*” while Huy noted that sharing teaching materials and experiences through these networks significantly contributes to professional development.

Overall, the combination of updated course materials and structured professional development reflects a strong commitment to improving English teaching quality in rural Vietnam. Teachers benefit not only from enhanced skills and resources but also from supportive professional networks that sustain motivation, engagement, and career growth.

Economic and Emotional Rewards from Extra/Private Tutoring

The growing demand for English in Vietnam, often referred to as “*English fever,*” has created numerous opportunities for EFL teachers to supplement their income through private tutoring and extra classes. With only three to four English lessons per week in the standard curriculum, many students and parents seek additional instruction, making tutoring a common practice. This not only helps students improve their language skills but also provides teachers, particularly in rural areas, where salaries are modest, with an important source of extra income. Huy remarked, “*Teaching English helps me maintain a basic standard of living... it provides a chance to improve my financial situation compared to teaching other subjects.*”

Extra classes are sometimes organized after school, allowing teachers to earn additional income. Mien explained that these sessions could provide 1-2 million VND (39-72 USD) per month, supplementing base salaries. Teachers can also work at licensed tutoring centers, preparing students for certification exams, further enhancing their earnings (Khuong). Government policies increasingly support teachers’ livelihoods, with additional financial assistance for newly graduated teachers and low-salary staff, as noted by Sanh.

Beyond financial benefits, private tutoring allows teachers more autonomy in curriculum and teaching methods. Dang emphasized, “*I also have complete freedom to decide on the curriculum, so it feels very comfortable.*” Teachers reported that this autonomy improves professional satisfaction and engagement with students, while also enhancing interpersonal skills and social intelligence. As Dang added, “*It feels as if I am spreading the language... that makes me feel I am contributing something meaningful to life.*”

Overall, extra teaching roles provide both economic and professional opportunities for EFL teachers in rural Vietnam. They allow teachers to supplement modest salaries, exercise curriculum autonomy, deepen engagement with students, and experience personal and professional fulfilment.

Discussion

The findings show that, despite the constraints of rural teaching contexts, EFL teachers identified several factors that sustained and enhanced their professional practice. Four key facilitators emerged: *teaching enjoyment and positive student relations*, which reflect the intrinsic motivation gained from meaningful classroom interactions; a *supportive work environment*, where collegiality and encouragement from school leaders foster belonging and recognition; *professional development and career growth*, which strengthen teachers’ competence and sense of legitimacy; and *extra income opportunities*, which ease financial pressures and indirectly support

teachers' commitment to the profession. Together, these facilitators illustrate how personal, institutional, and socio-economic factors interact to shape rural teachers' professional identities and resilience.

Teaching Enjoyment and Positive Student Relations

Teaching enjoyment and close student-teacher relationships emerged as a central facilitator of rural EFL teachers' professional commitment. Daily interactions marked by warmth, respect, and care provided strong intrinsic motivation and reinforced teachers' sense of purpose despite challenging working conditions.

This theme aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci 2000), which highlights intrinsic motivation arising from feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers frequently described joy in watching students improve – experiences that strengthened their intrinsic satisfaction and contributed to a sense of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Positive student behaviour also fulfilled the need for relatedness, enhancing teachers' well-being and persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Emotional connections with students acted as a protective buffer against stress, reflecting research showing that supportive student relationships enhance teacher resilience (Gu & Day, 2007). Even when facing limited resources or heavy workloads, teachers reported that students' progress and appreciation made the difficulties worth it.

The cultural dimension was equally significant. Teachers emphasized that rural students were “nice and obedient,” reflecting long-standing Vietnamese educational values rooted in Confucian traditions. Respectful behaviour is seen not only as good conduct but as evidence of effective teaching, which is a pattern observed in Vietnamese classroom culture (Trang & Anh, 2022). As shown in broader research (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011), positive student behaviour generates positive teacher emotions and higher job satisfaction. In this context, well-behaved students validated teachers' professional identity and affirmed their societal role. Teachers also perceived rural classrooms as calmer and more respectful than urban ones. Through Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), such comparisons enhanced morale and strengthened teachers' sense of competence.

Additionally, teaching enjoyment was closely tied to pedagogical creativity. Teachers noted that interactive activities and communicative methods not only engaged students but also increased their own enthusiasm. This reflects Frenzel et al.'s (2009) model, in which teachers' enjoyment stems from appraising classroom events as successful and meaningful.

Teachers' compassion for disadvantaged students strengthens professional motivation, reflecting the relational and moral dimensions of teaching in resource-constrained contexts. Prior research suggests that working with marginalised learners fosters a heightened sense of responsibility and emotional investment, serving as a powerful intrinsic motivator (Alhassan et. al, 2025). Participants' awareness of students' limited access to English-learning materials elicited empathy and shaped a pedagogical purpose, viewing their work as a way to reduce educational inequity. Rather than seeing rural disadvantage as demotivating, teachers used it as a catalyst to enhance instruction, illustrating how compassion can foster agency, resilience, and professional growth.

Heightened student engagement further reinforces the reciprocal link between learner responsiveness and teacher motivation. Positive student behaviours, such as curiosity, attentiveness, and appreciation, directly contribute to teachers' professional fulfilment and instructional enthusiasm (Kengatharan, 2020). In contexts with limited technology or extracurricular learning, new instructional inputs become especially meaningful, eliciting excitement and a sense of pedagogical effectiveness. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), whereby competence and relatedness enhance intrinsic motivation. Students' curiosity thus not only improves classroom atmosphere but actively shapes teachers' professional identities and sustains long-term engagement.

In sum, teaching enjoyment in rural Vietnam arises from an interplay of intrinsic motivation, cultural expectations, positive student-teacher relations, and successful pedagogical engagement. These emotional and relational factors are central to sustaining teachers' identities and resilience.

Supportive Work Environment

A supportive work environment emerged as a key facilitator sustaining EFL teachers in rural Vietnam. Teachers emphasized that collegiality, approachable leaders, and emotional or practical support significantly enhanced their motivation, confidence, and well-being, serving as compensatory mechanisms that strengthened their professional identity.

Leadership support was central. Many teachers described principals as understanding and encouraging, offering flexibility and recognition that reduced stress and fostered initiative. This aligns with research showing that trust in school leadership builds a positive organizational climate and strengthens teacher efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, 2009), whereas authoritarian or bureaucratic leadership diminishes autonomy and motivation (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). While not all schools offered such support, teachers who felt appreciated reported greater commitment and satisfaction.

Collegial relationships formed another vital foundation. Teachers valued colleagues who shared resources, assisted with lesson planning, and provided emotional encouragement. This sense of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997) fostered belonging and reduced burnout (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012). However, collaboration was sometimes hindered by workload or the physical distance between school campuses, leading to occasional isolation.

Social and emotional support also played a significant role. Teachers often shared personal and professional concerns with colleagues, benefiting from overlapping community networks that extend beyond school boundaries. In Vietnam's collectivist cultural context, harmonious relationships enhance commitment and provide emotional stability. This aligns with research showing that relational and emotional support, through recognition, responsiveness, and shared problem-solving, strengthens self-efficacy and professional motivation (Brouwers, Evers & Tomic, 1999).

Rural schools' smaller size further fosters close-knit professional communities, emphasizing cooperation over competition. Prior research shows that cooperative cultures foster shared goals, trust, and mutual support, reducing isolation and building collective efficacy, which reinforces teachers' identity as collaborative professionals rather than isolated actors (Rechsteiner et al., 2025). Teachers reported that interdependence was both a practical necessity and a meaningful professional norm.

The finding that a lower cost of living in rural areas supports teachers' work-life balance highlights the role of economic factors in teacher retention and well-being. With reduced financial pressures, teachers can devote more time and energy to instructional planning, classroom engagement, and personal development rather than basic needs. This reflects Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which suggests that fulfilling physiological and security needs is a prerequisite for higher-level motivations, including professional growth and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). In rural contexts, the ability to manage everyday expenses fosters stability and well-being, supporting long-term commitment and teaching effectiveness.

Participants' reflections highlight how physical and psychological comfort facilitates teaching. Clean air, serene surroundings, and the absence of urban stressors enhance relaxation, energy, and job satisfaction. Interaction with natural environments, such as green spaces, has been linked to improved mental health and reduced stress (Bettmann et al., 2024). Teachers viewed the rural environment as enabling sustained professional engagement and long-term commitment to students.

Low external pressure from parents, school leaders, and high-stakes exams also emerged as a facilitator. Unlike urban contexts, relaxed expectations allowed teachers to focus on meaningful teaching and exercise creativity. This aligns with research on teacher autonomy and motivation, showing that reduced external pressure enhances job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and professional agency (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By alleviating stress from performance evaluation, rural contexts provide conditions for teachers to engage more deeply with students and invest in professional development, highlighting the importance of supportive policy and contextual factors for sustaining teacher well-being and effectiveness.

Overall, the findings show that effective leadership, collegial cooperation, and relational care jointly strengthen teachers' emotional well-being, self-efficacy, and long-term engagement, highlighting teaching as a socially embedded practice rather than an individual cognitive task.

Professional Development and Career Growth

Professional development and career growth emerged as important facilitators sustaining EFL teachers' professional practice in rural Vietnam. Participants consistently noted that access to training, curriculum reforms, and collaborative learning opportunities enhanced their pedagogical skills and strengthened their professional identities.

Teachers frequently pointed to the introduction of new English textbooks under the 2018 General Education Program as a catalyst for change. Updated materials and related training encouraged more communicative and interactive teaching, prompting teachers to shift away from translation-focused instruction. This aligns with research indicating that curriculum reform can stimulate teacher learning by requiring reflection, experimentation, and adaptation (Fullan, 2007). Engagement with new pedagogical approaches not only improved teachers' instructional confidence but also reinforced their sense of agency as facilitators of meaningful learning.

Structured professional development, such as workshops, provincial meetings, and peer-observation sessions, also played a central role. These activities enabled teachers to acquire new strategies, exchange resources, and observe model lessons, helping reduce professional isolation. From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with literature on Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which emphasizes that teacher learning is most effective when it is sustained, collaborative, and contextually relevant (Avalos, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Teachers highlighted the relational benefits of CPD as well. Networking with colleagues across districts provided space for sharing challenges, co-developing solutions, and building collective professional norms. Monthly departmental demonstrations and inter-school workshops created communities of practice that supported both skill development and emotional resilience. This mirrors findings from rural contexts elsewhere, such as China, where collaborative culture and strong interpersonal networks help sustain teachers' motivation (Sun et al., 2024).

Overall, professional development in rural Vietnam functions not merely as a technical requirement but as a vital source of emotional support, professional validation, and identity enrichment. It enables teachers to persist, innovate, and find meaning in their work despite contextual constraints.

Economic and Emotional Rewards from Extra/Private Tutoring

Extra income opportunities emerged as a distinctive facilitator supporting the professional lives of EFL teachers in rural Vietnam. While participants acknowledged that public school salaries were insufficient, many reported that supplementary income from private tutoring, after-school classes, or freelance work helped ease financial stress and sustain their motivation and well-being. Rather than viewing financial strain solely as a

source of dissatisfaction, this theme shows how economic pragmatism intertwines with professional identity in resource-constrained contexts.

Teachers explained that their base salaries did not match their workload or living costs; several noted that “without extra classes” they could not meet basic expenses. This reflects nationwide patterns, where teachers, especially in rural areas, are paid relatively low wages compared to other professions with similar qualifications (Vietnam Insider, 2018). In this context, additional income became essential for maintaining stability, reducing morale loss, and preventing attrition, consistent with findings from other low-resource settings (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

Beyond financial necessity, teachers associated extra income activities with positive emotional and professional outcomes. Many described feelings of pride and security in being able to support their families or invest in classroom materials. From a Self-Determination Theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000), what began as extrinsic motivation often became internalized, as teachers derived genuine satisfaction from helping students progress in more flexible, small-group tutoring environments.

Extra income work also enhanced teachers’ sense of autonomy and agency, which aligns directly with SDT by fulfilling the basic psychological need for autonomy - dimension closely associated with professional identity and job satisfaction. Unlike public-school teaching, tutoring allowed them to choose materials, experiment with communicative methods, and respond more directly to students’ needs. This pedagogical freedom strengthened their confidence and expanded their professional identity, from state employees to self-directed educators.

The cultural context further shaped teachers’ interpretations of supplemental income. Financial stability was often described not as personal gain but as fulfilling moral and familial obligations, consistent with collectivist values in Vietnam. Teachers saw earning additional income as supporting their families, contributing to community expectations, and demonstrating responsible adulthood.

These findings mirror trends in other developing or rural contexts where secondary income sources, when managed effectively, help sustain teacher morale and commitment (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). In Vietnam, private tutoring is culturally accepted and often perceived as complementary, not contradictory, to teachers’ professional roles.

Overall, extra income opportunities function as both economic and psychological supports. Although rooted in extrinsic necessity, they become integrated motivators that enhance teachers’ autonomy, resilience, and sense of purpose. In rural Vietnam, financial pragmatism and professional idealism coexist, enabling teachers to remain committed to the profession while navigating structural constraints.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for educational policy, school leadership, and teacher development in rural Vietnam. First, the strong influence of teaching enjoyment and positive student relationships suggests that policies should prioritize creating emotionally supportive school environments. Initiatives that promote positive classroom climates, reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, and encourage meaningful teacher-student engagement can help sustain intrinsic motivation - an essential yet often overlooked aspect of teacher well-being.

Second, the role of a supportive work environment highlights the importance of school leadership. Rural schools, in particular, would benefit from leadership practices that emphasize collegial collaboration, recognition of teacher effort, and shared decision-making. Investing in school-based mentoring systems and fostering communities of practice may strengthen teachers’ sense of belonging and professional identity.

Third, the findings underscore the need to expand professional development and career growth pathways. Teachers in rural areas require more accessible, context-sensitive, and sustained forms of training that enhance both pedagogical competence and professional legitimacy. Policies that decentralize training resources, such as bringing workshops, online learning opportunities, and coaching closer to rural schools, can help bridge existing gaps.

Finally, the theme of extra income opportunities reveals an important but often unacknowledged dimension of rural teachers' professional sustainability. While low salaries are a systemic issue, this study shows that supplementary income activities can contribute positively to teachers' morale, autonomy, and sense of professional agency. Educational authorities should therefore consider financial reforms that reduce teachers' economic vulnerability while acknowledging the practical role of private tutoring in rural contexts. Ensuring transparency and ethical guidelines around extra income activities can support teachers without compromising educational equity.

Conclusion

This study examined the facilitators that sustain and enhance the professional practice of EFL teachers in rural Vietnam. Despite working in contexts marked by resource limitations, socio-economic constraints, and structural challenges, teachers identified four key factors that supported their professional engagement: *teaching enjoyment and positive student relations, a supportive work environment, professional development and career growth, and economic and emotional rewards from extra/private tutoring*. Together, these themes illuminate a complex interplay between personal motivation, institutional support, and economic realities.

The findings demonstrate that rural teachers' professional identities are shaped not only by material conditions and institutional structures but also by emotional experiences, social relationships, and culturally grounded values. Importantly, supplementary income emerged as both a coping mechanism and a meaningful extension of teachers' professional lives – an insight that challenges deficit-oriented narratives about rural teaching.

Overall, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher resilience and professional sustainability in under-resourced settings. It suggests that supporting rural EFL teachers requires a holistic approach, which acknowledges their emotional effort, respects their professional agency, expands their development opportunities, and improves the wider socio-economic conditions they face. Such an approach is essential for strengthening teacher retention, promoting high-quality language education, and ensuring equitable educational development across rural Vietnam.

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Appendix

Participants' Pseudonyms	Age	Years of teaching experience	Teaching context	Qualifications
Hao	29	7	A mountainous combined middle and high school	BA in English Pedagogy
Huy	47	25	A village middle school	BA in English Pedagogy
Dang	41	15	A town high school	MA TESOL
Lai	49	27	A town middle school	MA in ELT Education
Van	29	7	A town middle school	BA in English Pedagogy
Phat	26	4	A town private high school	BA TESOL
Phuong	49	27	A town middle school	MA TESOL
Lien	43	21	A village middle school	BA in English Pedagogy
Phan	36	14	A village middle school	BA in English Pedagogy
Sanh	41	19	A village middle school	MA in English Pedagogy
Sim	45	23	A village middle school	BA in English Pedagogy
Anh	24	2	A town high school	BA in English Linguistics
Quyên	24	2	A town private middle school	BA in English Linguistics
Mien	27	5	A village elementary school	BA in English Pedagogy
Ha	32	10	A mountainous combined middle and high school	BA in English Pedagogy
Lan	41	19	A town high school	MA in English Linguistics
Hoi	35	13	A mountainous combined middle and high school	BA in English Pedagogy
Kim	42	20	A mountainous elementary school	BA in English Pedagogy
Huong	43	21	A town high school	BA in English Pedagogy
Khuong	39	17	A town high school	BA in English Pedagogy
Tap	40	18	A village elementary	BA in English

			school	Pedagogy
Tan	39	17	A town combined middle and high school	MA in English Linguistics
Hau	35	13	A town high school	BA in English Pedagogy
Tuy	29	7	A village elementary school	BA in English Pedagogy

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Mi segít nekünk itt tanítani: A vietnámi vidéki EFL-tanárokat támogató motivációs és kontextuális tényezők

Ez a tanulmány azokat a tényezőket vizsgálja, amelyek a vietnámi vidéki területeken dolgozó angol mint idegen nyelv (EFL) tanárok szakmai gyakorlatát támogatják. Fenomenológiai megközelítésre támaszkodva az adatokat több tartományban EFL-tanárokkal készített félig strukturált mélyinterjúkkal gyűjtöttük. Az elemzés négy egymással összefüggő tényezőt azonosított, amelyek a tanárok munkáját és szakmai identitását támogatják: (1) a tanítás öröme és a pozitív tanár–diák kapcsolatok, amelyek elősegítik a céltudatosság és az érzelmi kiteljesedés kialakulását; (2) a támogató munkakörnyezet, ideértve a kollégák közötti összetartást és az iskolavezetés megértő hozzáállását; (3) a szakmai továbbképzéshez és a karrierfejlődési lehetőségekhez való hozzáférés, amelyek támogatják a kompetenciák fejlődését és fenntartják a hosszú távú motivációt; valamint (4) a magánórákon való részvételből származó anyagi és érzelmi elismerés, amely enyhíti a pénzügyi nyomást és stabilitásérzetet teremt. Az önmeghatározás-elmélet, a pozitív pszichológia és a szociokulturális perspektívák keretében a kutatási eredmények azt mutatják, hogy ezek a támogató tényezők együttesen hozzájárulnak a tanárok autonómiájához, kompetenciáinak alakulásához és kapcsolatteremtő képességéhez, lehetővé téve számukra, hogy a nehéz vidéki körülmények ellenére is megőrizzék szakmai elkötelezettségüket. A tanulmány rávilágít arra, hogy mennyire fontos a meglévő helyi erőforrások felismerése és megerősítése a tanári fluktuáció csökkentése és az oktatás minőségének javítása érdekében a vietnámi vidéki iskolákban.

Kulcsszavak: *facilitátor, EFL tanár, vidéki Vietnam, átélt tapasztalatok*