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Challenges of Teaching English in Rural Contexts of Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

English language education has been prioritized by the Mongolian government since 1990 when Mongolia transitioned from socialism to democracy. Recently, the Ministry of Education has announced that it is planning to commence teaching English in grade 3 at the primary level in public schools from the academic year of 2025–2026, a change from the current practice of starting in grade 5. To implement this change, there is a need to explore the realities of English education in various contexts of Mongolia. However, the research investigating the current issues in English education in rural schools is limited. Addressing this gap, the study aims to explore the challenges that rural English teachers encounter. The findings indicate the following challenges which include heavy workload, low salaries, limited teaching resources, shortage of teachers and low levels of English proficiency. However, the geographical and socio-economic dynamics of rural Mongolia amplify these difficulties and present unique circumstances that affect their motivation and wellbeing. Furthermore, the study recommends that there is an immediate need for the government and the relevant institutions to implement policies addressing the systemic factors that demotivate them aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of rural teachers to prevent their burnout, reducing teacher shortage and attrition, and improving the quality of English education in Mongolia's remote areas.

Keywords: English Language Education; Rural English Teachers; Challenges of Teaching English; Teachers' Wellbeing; Mongolia

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1. Introduction

As evidenced in previous studies^[1–5] and in a number of government policy documents^[6–8], English language education has been prioritized in Mongolia since 1990 when Mongolia transitioned from socialism to democracy. Clearly, it has become crucial for the Mongolian government to support English language education and meet the demands for multilingualism in an age of increasing globalization and digital technology use. Recently, the Ministry of Education has announced that it is planning to commence teaching English in grade 3 at the primary level in public schools from the academic year of 2025–2026, a change from the current practice of starting in grade 5. To implement this change, in fact, there is a need to explore the realities of English language education in various contexts of Mongolia. However, the research investigating the current issues in English language education particularly in rural schools of Mongolia is quite limited, despite a few in the urban contexts of Mongolia^[5, 9]. As Mongolia is a vast country which is divided into 21 provinces which are called *aimags* and the provinces are subdivided into 330 *soums*, the realities of teaching English in those contexts need to be investigated. In this study, by rural schools, we refer to those located in provincial/*aimag* centers and *soums*. There were 3469 English teachers nationwide, 1244 of whom were employed in rural Mongolia in the academic year of 2024–2025^[10]. The fact that 1176 of these teachers were women^[10] underscores the essential roles that female teachers play in English language instruction in rural Mongolia.

This study aims to explore the realities of English education in rural settings by uncovering a broader perspective of challenges that English teachers encounter in rural Mongolian schools. Since teachers are essential for the effective implementation of English language policies and practices, their voices need to be heard, furthermore, as Sato et al.^[11] state there is limited empirical research into EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher motivation in diverse contexts. Drawing on the analysis of interviews with five teachers and an expat teacher trainer living in rural contexts of Mongolia, this paper addresses two main research questions:

1. What challenges do Mongolian English teachers encounter while teaching English in rural schools?
2. How do these challenges affect their wellbeing and motivation of being English teachers?

Within the parameters of these questions, the research findings yielded insights that might inform improvements to educational policies concerning the wellbeing of English language teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Language Education in the Rural Asian Context

Rural communities in Asia often face a wide array of socioeconomic challenges, such as low income, underemployment, population decline, youth migration, and inadequate access to digital connectivity, cultural amenities, sports facilities and basic public services. These issues severely impact rural schools which struggle with insufficient infrastructure and limited teaching resources^[12]. In the context of EFL/ESL education in Asia, these challenges are further compounded by infrastructural limitations, socio-cultural dynamics and policy shortcomings. Key issues are resource scarcity^[13] and socio-cultural resistance to English^[14]. Other challenges include poor working conditions, overcrowded classrooms, limited resources and low salaries which negatively impact their motivation and retention^[15–17].

The most pressing issue, however, is a shortage of qualified teachers and the inadequate preparation of English teachers^[18]. Studies consistently highlight the lack of properly trained educators^[19–21]. The disparity in the availability of certified teachers between urban and rural areas is particularly pronounced in smaller towns^[22]. This shortage is exacerbated by the tendency of qualified teachers to seek employment in urban areas where opportunities are more abundant^[23]. Consequently, rural areas, especially in countries like China, continue to face a severe lack of certified English teachers^[17, 24, 25]. Another issue frequently cited is low English proficiency among rural English teachers and this challenge, coupled with low English exposure in the local environment, makes it difficult for teachers to build a strong language learning environment^[20, 21]. Furthermore, there are limited teacher training opportunities^[26] and such limited access to ongoing professional development prevents teachers from updating their skills or learning new pedagogical approaches^[25]. Thus, assembling a highly competent teaching staff in some rural Asian education contexts has become a priority and a key objective of the education policy

including elementary schools in Indonesia^[27], and elementary and secondary schools in China^[28].

2.2. Factors Affecting EFL/ESL Teacher (De)Motivation

The growing ELT market in East Asia has prompted numerous scholars to examine teacher motivation in the region^[29]. Several studies have since examined the factors that (de)motivate teachers and their impact on overall motivation, emphasizing the importance of understanding both motivators and demotivators^[16]. It is well-established that English teachers' motivation is shaped by their work environment and relationships with the school community, including students, parents, colleagues and administrators^[16]. The studies about EFL teacher demotivation in various contexts like China, Japan, South Korea, Turkey and Vietnam^[30–35] highlight how specific challenges faced by teachers contribute to their declining motivation. Identifying and categorizing demotivating factors - such as heavy workloads, extracurricular duties, administrative tasks and additional tutoring - help provide a clearer understanding of the issues^[16]. In some cases, teachers have also reported concerns over insufficient time to effectively teach English^[16], alongside challenges like low student interest, poor salaries and inadequate access to essential technology in some areas^[16, 36]. Moreover, demotivating factors such as bureaucratic school cultures, overcrowded classrooms and ineffective administration further exacerbate the situation^[37, 38].

Notably, demotivating factors do not affect all teachers equally. While financial incentives may positively impact one teacher's motivation, their absence can have the opposite effect on another^[11]. Understanding these factors moves beyond psychological perspectives to develop more effective strategies for improving motivation^[39]. When motivation is low, the quality of education declines which can lead to emotional exhaustion and professional dissatisfaction^[11, 40]. On the other hand, higher levels of motivation foster professional development and teaching effectiveness^[16]. Therefore, developing an educational system that prioritizes teachers' mental health and supports their development as active agents is crucial^[11]. Interestingly, demotivating factors can sometimes drive teachers to advance their careers through internalization, particularly for experienced educators who can channel negative experiences into constructive

motivation^[33, 35, 41, 42]. It is noteworthy that some teachers, especially those with a passion for teaching, have even transformed challenges, such as those from the COVID-19 pandemic, into opportunities for growth and motivation^[11]. All these factors prompted us to investigate the realities of English language teaching in rural Mongolia to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and struggles faced by teachers.

3. Methodology

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by Mongolian rural English teachers in teaching English and to examine how these challenges impact their well-being and motivation. The research is based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with five EFL teachers from four different rural areas, each with varying educational backgrounds, as well as one expatriate teacher trainer participating in a fellowship program from an English-speaking country, who worked in a provincial center for ten months (**Table 1**). Additionally, a questionnaire was developed following the interviews to determine which challenges were the most and least demotivating for the participants.

Out of the local participants, three teachers had an experience of living and studying in English speaking countries. Dolgor got her Master's degree from a university in Australia and Saran completed a one-year program related to teaching a language in the USA. Bayar used to study in the USA as an exchange student for over a year. Though **Table 1** shows where the participants worked when the data for this study were collected, two of the local teachers had teaching experiences in urban educational settings before they started working in rural schools. According to the framework of teacher career stages proposed by Day and Gu^[43], the participants in the study were mid-career teachers (10–22 years). A reason for inviting David to participate in this study was to enhance the quality of the research by gaining multiple perspectives from different types of research participants. For 10 months, he worked as a teacher trainer for about 70 English teachers who were from the schools in an aimag center and the soums belonging to that aimag.

To collect data, the study used semi-structured interviews which took place in 2023 and 2024 at times suitable to the participants and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Pseudonyms	Age Group	Gender	English Teaching Experience	Current Workplace
Alimaa	35–40	Female	16 years	Soum school in a western aimag
Naraa	35–40	Female	15 years	Soum school in a western aimag
Bayar	35–40	Female	14 years	Private English language center in a western aimag
Dolgor	45–50	Female	22 years	Soum school in a southern aimag
Saran	30–35	Female	10 years	Currently on leave, used to work in two different soum schools, one is in northern aimag and the other is in eastern aimag
David	40–45	Male	18 years in different countries	Currently teaches in a university in a city after working as a teacher trainer in an aimag center for 10 months

The interviews with the teachers were conducted in their native language, Mongolian, and the interview with the teacher trainer was in English. Four participants were interviewed face-to-face and the interviews with other two participants were conducted via Facebook Messenger as this was the most convenient and easy to access online application for them. The explanatory statement which included the overview of the research, its aims and ethical considerations, and consent forms were sent to the participants, and they had the right to withdraw at any stage during data collection. They all signed informed consent forms before being interviewed. To ensure that the identity of the participants and schools remained anonymous, the data in this study have been reported using pseudonyms.

The six semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The interview questions covered their teaching experiences, current teaching situation, challenges, resources/support, workload, professional development opportunities, future goals and their English language proficiency. The interviews conducted in Mongolian were translated by the authors who are fluent in both languages. The data were analyzed drawing on the elements of the thematic analysis^[44, 45] using an inductive approach guided by Grounded Theory^[46]. After familiarizing ourselves with the data through reading interview transcripts repeatedly, we identified codes that are the “smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research question”^[45] (p. 297). Then the codes were grouped into the themes that emerged from the data following the multiple discussions which helped the authors develop their ideas and thoroughly analyze the data. In addition, an online questionnaire consisting of 15

Likert scale questions, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” was developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire was designed based on the challenges identified by the participants to assess which challenges were perceived as the most and least demotivating. Internal consistency reliability of a 15-item Likert scale assessing factors influencing English teacher motivation was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha = 0.67$, $n = 5$). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient functions as a metric for evaluating the internal consistency reliability of a measurement instrument, yielding values between 0 and 1, whereby scores exceeding 0.60 are deemed adequate for exploratory research purposes, while values of 0.70 or greater are generally requisite for confirmatory investigations to establish sufficient reliability^[47]. Though the extremely limited sample size ($n = 5$) introduces uncertainty in the reliability estimate, necessitating appropriate contextualization of findings in this study, in general, the coefficient indicates that the questionnaire questions were trustworthy for exploratory study.

4. Findings

From our thematic analysis of the interviews with five EFL teachers and one expat teacher trainer across five rural contexts about the challenges of being English teachers in rural settings of Mongolia and the demotivating factors affecting them, three key themes emerged: (a) work-related stressors; (b) financial insecurity; and (c) social and professional isolation. These themes will be explored in the subsections below. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire are presented in the Section 4.4.

4.1. Theme 1: Work-Related Stressors

According to the research participants in this study, the workload was the major challenge that they have experienced in teaching English in rural contexts. Due to the teacher shortage in some rural schools, three of the teachers had to teach more hours exceeding the required teaching hours for teachers which are 19 hours per week. For example, Dolgor said that she had to teach 30 hours a week since the school could not recruit an English teacher. She added: “of course, it is hard to employ an English teacher to teach in a rural school with such a low salary”. Bayar also pointed out that a soum school which is 200 kms’ away from the aimag center had not been able to find an English teacher for a while and a teacher who was not majored in English language teaching had been teaching English there. She had worked in that school for 3 years because her spouse had to work there during those years. Therefore, Bayar had been trying to help the school find an English teacher and asked a novice teacher whom she had been supporting to improve her English by letting her take English classes at her private English language center. However, the young teacher did not want to work in that soum. In fact, the novice teacher’s English proficiency level was so low that she could teach at elementary level, and she had given up being an English teacher feeling disappointed with her English. Thus, Bayar decided to help her as she wanted to contribute to rural English education by training and improving at least a teacher who had given up and wanted to teach in a kindergarten. Furthermore, Bayar stated that “nobody wants to live and work in an isolated soum, even the teachers whose English is bad”. Saran also mentioned that when she took the exam to be employed as a teacher by a soum school in 2015, almost ten people took the exam, but now there are hardly any candidates. Clearly, the teacher shortage has been prevalent in rural schools, particularly in isolated soums, being one of the major causes of the teachers’ workload and ultimately affecting the quality of English language education in rural areas.

Another factor that increased English teachers’ workload has been related to the fact that Mongolia started implementing the Pearson English program in public schools starting from the academic year of 2023–2024. The schoolteachers who participated in this study talked about how hard it had been to implement the program in the rural schools due

to the quality of the internet, lack of digital literacy of both teachers and students, and the fact that some students’ phones were not compatible with the Pearson program. Here are some comments in that regard:

I have been teaching English in the schools in an aimag center and in two soums in different aimags. Based on my teaching experience and according to the teachers who took part in the workshops that I conducted voluntarily for English teachers in five soums to share the professional development opportunities, the authorities just want to implement new curricula without preparing the teachers and school facilities beforehand. Therefore, all the responsibilities related to implementing the programs fall solely on the teachers. Simply, I want to teach English. I don’t want to teach children how to hold a computer mouse during my teaching hours. Due to the workload that I experienced in a school where an international curriculum has been implemented, I became burnt out and started taking medicine for blood pressure, and my two children got sick very often because I did not have enough time to take care of them well. Therefore, I took a leave of absence for this year (Saran)

It is really hard to teach nearly 30 children in a classroom when implementing the Pearson program as children need my assistance when they encounter problems with online access. While solving those problems my teaching hours are over. Thus, we requested the principal to divide the big classes into two groups. However, according to the principal, it is impossible as this will impact the level of the salary. Anyways, I mostly work in the afternoon with the children who could not access the online platform during the class in the morning. How can I leave them out? Again, this increases my workload (Naraa)

Besides teaching workload and unpaid extra hours of work related to implementing the Pearson program, the teach-

ers were concerned about their students' decreased level of motivation in doing their English lessons following the COVID-19 pandemic. They commented that some students had not been able to focus during the classes which made their teaching harder. Moreover, according to the research participants, mostly during the weekends some teachers were expected to assist their local communities by participating in sports competitions organized by the local governing bodies and even doing work such as painting fences or stadiums to improve the look of their soums. Though these tasks were not directly related to their jobs, they, particularly young teachers, had to invest their time and energy due to their concerns about job security. Thus, being busy with their jobs and other duties may have impacted their wellbeing causing burnout, dissatisfaction with their jobs and demotivation to develop themselves. For instance, this is evidenced in the account by the teacher trainer:

I noticed that some of them [teachers] look burned out, they work really hard sometimes, and they're asked to come on the weekend to do sporting competitions. So, when they come to the professional development sessions, some of them would fall asleep. They're very burned out, they're very tired. The teachers in Mongolia work from 8 am to 5 pm or 6 pm. For them, finding the time to improve professionally is important but it could be a challenge too because they're always busy and they're always on the go... I think the weekend is a time for teachers to relax, take time to themselves and refresh. So, it was kind of sad for me to hear that some of them had to go and work (David)

Moreover, the additional tasks, like taking or participating in various surveys from the authorities consume the teachers' time and make them stressed. For example, Naraa pointed out that:

Sometimes the school manager requests us to handle some paperwork immediately, before the deadline regardless of our teaching duties. In that case teachers must work on their computers dealing with those tasks without being able to teach students and asking them to do

the exercises in their textbooks. My teaching hours are wasted! Actually, we always carry our laptops with us when we sometimes go to aimag center or somewhere to rest because there can be urgent paperwork to complete anytime. If there is, we turn on our laptops and work even in the car while on the road (Naraa)

In addition, two teachers were not satisfied with the school's management. Alimaa stated that hard-working and well qualified teachers should be supported and given incentives. Further, she emphasized that the school management in her school held biased attitudes toward teachers depending on which political party they support or whether they are relatives:

The school principals and management should support teachers equally without any political intrusion and although they are relatives or close friends. My previous principal used to ignore hard-working teachers' work and effort. Those teachers were not his supporters; thus, he undervalued them. That was so demotivating for me. There are people in this soum who don't talk to each other because of politics. That's a disadvantage of living in a small rural community (Alimaa)

Saran was also critical that persons in school management and the authorities in the Ministry of Education did not care about the workload which had been the greatest challenge for the rural teachers, who were mostly female. She highlighted that most teachers whom she met during her workshops were stressed and angry, and she attributed this to the fact that those teachers mostly start teaching soon after giving birth to their children due to the teacher shortage and financial needs without taking care of themselves well enough. In general, it seems that the wellbeing of the rural teachers has been overlooked and there is a need for qualified English teachers in rural schools to reduce the workload of current teachers.

4.2. Theme 2: Financial Insecurity

Another prominent theme which emerged in the data is related to the fact that schoolteachers in Mongolia do not

earn enough. Despite efforts by the Mongolian government to support the teachers working in rural schools by offering extra pay which is 20–40 percent of their regular salary, most of the teachers in this study needed to earn extra income. For example, Naraa had been cultivating vegetables, as well as preparing dairy products for her family and for commercial purposes during the entire summer. She said that she started her day at 5 am by milking cows and was busy till midnight like a slave. Otherwise, it was challenging for her family to manage the living expenses and pay the interest of the bank loan that was spent to build a house. As a single mother with two children, Saran as well worked as a tourist guide during her summer holiday and whenever there was an opportunity to earn extra money such as translating or offering private English tutorials to schoolchildren, she tried to grab. The data indicate that due to low pay teachers needed to work during their holiday instead of resting and preparing for the next academic year.

The dissatisfaction with their salaries leads some teachers to quit their jobs in rural areas and move to urban areas or from soum to aimag centers. When he worked as a teacher trainer, David heard many stories from teachers and he concluded that besides workload, low pay was the key challenge for the teachers in rural areas:

I've also noticed that the teachers were struggling so much with the pay, teachers' salary, and there were a lot of complaints about the salary. In a city it's the same issue but it's a bit better because there are a lot of private schools in a city, so some teachers get paid more. So, there's a higher potential that if you are a highly qualified teacher, you'd be offered a better paying job. I've seen teachers from an aimag come to a city to work at these private schools, because they can get paid more than living in an aimag or a soum. That's another reason that you might find a lot of highly qualified teachers working outside rural areas and they don't decide to stay in the countryside because they want to have a better opportunity somewhere else (David)

Similarly, Saran and Bayar said that the advantage of living in an aimag center instead of in a soum was the oppor-

tunity for earning money out of work hours through giving tutorials.

Furthermore, teachers' financial situation caused them more dissatisfaction with their jobs and worry about their future. Naran commented that all her relatives moved to Kazakhstan, and they had been living abundantly there. Thus, she started thinking about moving from the current soum for the sake of her children's future. Two teachers who worked in soums expressed their concerns about not earning enough for the future education of their children. Dolgor mentioned that most of the teachers were single mothers, thus, they carry more financial burden. It is noteworthy here that some teachers go to South Korea to earn money during their summer holiday. Like those teachers, last summer, Saran went to work there and spent the money she earned to travel in the US by attending two conferences for English teachers. She explained that the reason for attending the conferences was to learn from others and to explore herself more. If she did not work in Korea, she would not have been able to travel for personal and professional development purposes.

4.3. Theme 3: Social and Professional Isolation

According to the research participants, living in a small community, particularly in a soum, presents specific challenges, such as a lack of social life and an absence of boundaries in social communication:

If you live in a city, if you're bored, you would go to a coffee shop and sit on your computer surrounded by people. You could go to the movies to watch a movie. There are plenty of things that you could do in the city to improve your mental health. I know a lot of people would argue that people who live in a small town have better mental health. But what I observe is if you live in a small town like this where I am living in right now you don't have a lot of things to do or you don't have a lot of support for social and emotional needs. And that's why I see a lot of people, who live in the countryside here, travel to the nearby city to do things to just be happy (David)

At first, it was challenging when I moved to

a soum to work after graduating. All my fellow alumni and friends remained in the city, enjoying a comfortable and appealing work environment. In contrast, I was working in a rural school, which felt quite isolated and gave me a sense of being left behind ... One of the challenges of living in a soum is the difficulty of gaining acceptance from the local community. Being an outsider is hard, and it took me nearly three years to be accepted. At that time, I was a single mother. It seemed that my out-of-work environment was the most difficult due to gossiping and intruding into my personal life (Saran)

In addition, the data indicate some teachers in soum schools felt they are left behind their peers in aimag or urban schools professionally. They believed that urban teachers had more opportunities to engage in practicing and improving their English, and further develop themselves. However, David, a teacher trainer, emphasized that a lot of teachers did not attend his professional development sessions due to the reason that they were busy. Thus, some rural teachers' lack of time for professional development opportunities leads them to not having the opportunity to interact with a native English speaker and their peers to discuss issues in their teaching and update their knowledge of teaching methodology. Moreover, those teachers can be experiencing or feeling professional isolation, lacking engagement with professional peers.

Depending on the geographic location and the availability of financial support from certain sources, such as mining, teachers had varying levels of professional development opportunities. For example, Dolgor got a scholarship to complete her Master's study overseas from a mining company in her soum. She highlighted that, besides the compulsory professional development sessions for teachers offered by the Ministry of Education and Department of Education of an aimag, there were numerous workshops, seminars, and training programs provided by universities and projects financially supported by the mining company which made the teachers 'tired':

I was asked to attend a workshop in a different soum for an entire day, which required a two-hour drive each way. I returned home late

at night. The following day, the school principal requested that I go to the aimag center for a three-day seminar. I couldn't attend and took a day off due to a headache and feeling exhausted. This is our winter break, and we need to rest. However, some of my younger colleagues are being forced to go. When someone is coerced into attending, how can they learn anything effectively? This is one of the burdens of being a teacher in a soum. I feel sorry for the young teachers who have to take their babies with them and breastfeed them on the road. Why can't they offer online seminars? (Dolgor)

Furthermore, Dolgor pointed out that attending the professional development sessions in the aimag center was costly for her because the school did not cover hotel expenses. She had no relatives or friends in the area to stay with. Moreover, Dolgor and Saran were critical of the fact that most of the professional development sessions did not meet the teachers' needs, as the content was often repetitive and sometimes redundant. In fact, according to the participants in this study, what most rural English teachers need is to improve their English proficiency levels. David also emphasized that the teachers needed more support in English language development, which did not meet his expectations of focusing on developing teaching skills.

The data also show that sometimes geographic isolation does not necessarily correlate with professional isolation. Dolgor who got a degree from a university and Saran and Bayar who completed the certain programs (student exchange and professional development) in English speaking countries seemed to be more agentive in terms of developing themselves and contributing to the English language education in their respective schools or communities by taking initiatives. For instance, Dolgor in collaboration with two other teachers prepared a project to improve rural English education and was going to equip the English classrooms in her school with smartboards that can be used to access online resources. Saran had been voluntarily running the sessions for the rural English teachers to share her teaching experiences of implementing Pearson program and professional development opportunities for them. The reason for conducting those sessions was to motivate them based on

her observation that teachers with low English proficiency levels often lack self-confidence, feel demotivated in teaching English, and experience shame regarding their language skills.

4.4. Results of the Questionnaire

Five teachers rated various factors on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The results of the questionnaire provided several key insights into the factors affecting English teachers’ motivation. The data revealed a strong negative correlation between remuneration levels and teacher motivation, with all respondents (100%) acknowledging this relationship. Classroom composition, particularly concerning large student numbers, emerged as a significant demotivating factor, with 80% of participants indicating agreement. Similarly, 80% of respondents identified insufficient time for professional development as a major impediment to motivation. The results also show a divided response regarding excessive instructional hours, with 60% of participants strongly agreeing that this factor negatively affected their motivation, while 40% somewhat disagreed. This divergence suggests that contextual variables may influence the extent to which workload impacts teacher motivation. Additionally, the data indicate that certain factors had minimal demotivating effects. Community engagement activities were not perceived as demotivating by 80% of respondents. Furthermore, administrative responsibilities and curriculum implementation—specifically the Pearson program—were not regarded as significant obstacles to motivation.

5. Discussion

The study indicates that the rural English teachers in Mongolia face a variety of challenges like their counterparts in other Asian countries, including heavy workload, low salaries, limited teaching resources, shortage of teachers and low levels of English proficiency^[13, 17, 25, 34]. The economic factors, such as low salaries, excessive workload (including large class sizes, limited time, and additional teaching hours), and student engagement issues were the primary sources of demotivation for the participant teachers. The challenges they experienced, particularly heavy workload and low salaries, also align with the results of previous stud-

ies that focused on English teachers in urban settings in Mongolia^[5, 9]. However, the geographical and socio-economic dynamics of rural Mongolia, especially its isolated nature, amplify these difficulties and present unique circumstances that affect the motivation and wellbeing of English teachers. In fact, teachers working in soums are particularly affected by this isolation, which not only restricts professional growth but also contributes to feelings of being “left behind” in their careers. As illustrated by Saran and Naraa, programs such as the Pearson English curriculum have added substantial responsibilities on already overworked teachers without adequate infrastructure or digital support. This mirrors similar studies in other rural Asian contexts but is intensified by Mongolia’s vast geography and varying levels of development across soums and aimags. Financially, rural English teachers face a persistent income gap and often have to supplement their incomes with secondary employment or private tutoring sessions out of necessity, despite their already demanding jobs. However, in particularly isolated areas, like many soums, even these economic opportunities are rare. Although government bonuses provide some relief, the salary disparity between rural and urban positions, even among different rural locations, remains a major factor influencing teacher retention in Mongolia’s rural schools.

Furthermore, the social isolation experienced by rural teachers, particularly in soums, impacts their job satisfaction and well-being. Unlike their urban counterparts, English teachers in these small communities lack social and leisure outlets, which affect their mental health. Participants like David emphasized the absence of a social life and professional networks in soums, noting that teachers often turn to nearby aimag centers for even basic amenities and recreational opportunities. Compounding this isolation, there is the expectation that teachers engage in community activities and additional duties beyond teaching such as sports events over the weekend, which limit their freedom and ability to take care of their mental and physical health. Another nuanced issue is Mongolia’s socio-political environment in rural areas and how it influences teachers’ professional experiences in ways that may not be as evident in urban areas. The testimonies of teachers such as Alimaa reveal how political favouritism and local social dynamics shape teachers’ daily lives and sense of worth within their communities. In tight-knit rural settings, political connections and personal

relationships with school management can significantly impact teachers' motivation and perceptions of fairness, with some teachers feeling undervalued due to biases in school administration and poor management. In fact, the school culture including teachers' relationships with their colleagues and management can influence teacher's professional agency towards changes and an unwelcoming culture can demotivate them by inhibiting their willingness to develop themselves as revealed in Min's study^[48].

Together, these findings point to a need for targeted strategies that address the multitude of challenges faced by rural English teachers in Mongolia. Since teachers are the key stakeholders in enhancing English language education in rural areas of Mongolia, it is vital for the Mongolian government to implement strategies for preparing, recruiting and retaining qualified English teachers to live and work in these regions. Supporting their professional development is also crucial, as emphasized by Gao and Xu^[15] in their study on the rural context in China. In fact, retaining teachers is a complex endeavor that involves multiple factors, ranging from the macro-level implementation of positive education policies such as increasing the salary and other welfare benefits to address any concerns related to their living and working conditions to the micro-level organization of various teacher training programs^[24]. Thus, increased financial incentives, such as rural retention bonuses, housing subsidies and opportunities for supplemental income through tutoring, could help bridge the urban-rural income gap and prevent qualified teachers from seeking employment in cities. Additionally, improving digital infrastructure and offering digital literacy training for rural schoolchildren are essential steps to reducing teachers' workloads and enabling effective implementation of the Pearson program. Otherwise, the shortage of teachers will further widen the rural-urban divide, a long-standing social boundary in Mongolian society, which is enacted or reinforced through unequal access to English language education^[49].

Importantly, the study shows that, amongst many other factors, the mental health of teachers living and working in rural contexts isolated from urban areas cannot be overlooked. Evidently, the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities cause significant stress and even health issues for many mid-career teachers, particularly female teachers with children in this study. As Sulis et al.^[50] have pointed

out, the well-being of teachers is influenced by multiple layers of socio-contextual factors, ranging from the macro-level, encompassing society and government policies, to the meso-level, which includes family and community influences, and extending to the micro-level of the school environment and individual classrooms. Further, they^[50] claim that teachers would benefit from being guided towards developing well-being awareness as early as possible in their professional careers. Therefore, there is an immediate need for the government and the relevant institutions to implement policies or strategies addressing the systemic factors that increase teachers' workload and demotivate them aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of rural teachers to prevent their burnout. For instance, extra duties or paperwork can be reduced, Professional Learning Networks can be developed which help teachers avoid feelings of isolation and develop themselves^[50], and positive and collegial relationships among the colleagues should be developed as Chu et al.^[51] and Sato et al.^[11] recommend.

Given the fact that language teachers' work intersects with their multiple identities, relationships and communities^[52], the study also suggests the importance of accessible professional development and networking programs tailored to teachers' needs in the rural context, ideally offered online or in hybrid formats that allow them to engage with updating their teaching methods, improving English language proficiency and connecting with peers. In this study, while some teachers lacked time for professional development opportunities, the others reported that the professional development sessions they attended were unnecessary and perceived as a source of stress rather than an opportunity for professional growth. In fact, perceptions of professional development yielded mixed results, with time constraints being a more significant challenge than the availability or content of professional development opportunities. This means there is a need to encourage self-led professional learning and English teachers' professional development needs should be met by the authorities as Lei and Medwell^[53] argue. In addition, these findings are in line with the arguments about the importance of the contextual support from educational authorities or schools, including provisions for time, funding and opportunities^[54]. Moreover, the study shows that the teachers who have had international exposure or advanced degrees tend to adopt more agentive roles in their professional de-

velopment by being more proactive in seeking opportunities for self-improvement and in contributing to their local communities by initiating projects to improve English language education. This suggests that professional isolation may not be solely geographic but also linked to individual agency towards professional development.

Overall, depending on whether rural English teachers in Mongolia live and work in a provincial (aimag) center or soum, their distance from cities or aimag centers, and the financial viability of an area (e.g., the presence of mining or other income sources), they encounter a distinctive set of challenges and opportunities. Further, the initiatives designed to enhance teacher motivation should focus on addressing economic concerns, optimizing class sizes, and ensuring adequate time allocation for professional development activities. This study emphasizes the necessity for systemic support to reduce teacher shortage and attrition and enhance the quality of English language education in Mongolia's remote areas. Addressing these interrelated issues could transform the landscape of rural English education, thereby positively influencing teachers' motivation and well-being. The study also contributes to the understanding of the realities of English language education in Mongolia and encourages educational practitioners and policymakers to recognize the importance of examining the implementation of language policies and practices at the micro level. However, to obtain diverse perceptions and perspectives on rural English education in the context of Mongolia and to enhance the range and scope of this study, future studies need to involve more teachers and other stakeholders like students or parents as research participants.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, D.M.; methodology, D.M.; validation, D.M. and A.B.; formal analysis, D.M. and A.B.; investigation, D.M. and A.B.; resources, D.M. and A.B.; data curation, D.M.; writing—original draft preparation, D.M. and A.B.; writing—review and editing, D.M. and A.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The authors certify that the study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards and principles as laid down in the Principles of Research Ethics by the National University of Mongolia. When we started the data collection in 2023 there was no need to get an ethical approval from the university as the ethics committee was not established officially. Thus, following the general guidelines and principles of research ethics, informed consent was obtained from all research participants included in the study and their anonymity and privacy have been kept confidential.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the anonymity and privacy of the research participants.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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