TEACHING ACROSS GRADES: LESSON DELIVERY STRATEGIES OF ESL TEACHERS IN MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS AT SELECTED MALAYSIAN LOW ENROLMENT SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

Multigrade classrooms are a common feature of rural low enrolment schools worldwide, where students from two different grade levels are taught within the same classroom. In the Malaysian context, such settings pose distinct pedagogical demands, particularly for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. This study explores the lesson delivery strategies employed by ESL teachers in selected Malaysian low enrolment multigrade schools. Guided by the Learning Environment, Learning Processes, and Learning Outcomes (LEPO) framework, a qualitative case study design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving eight ESL teachers from selected low enrolment schools in Selangor, Pahang, Perak, and Johor. The findings revealed six main themes; alternating instructional focus between different grade levels, alignment of language skills and topics across grades, peer-assisted learning practices, multigrade lesson planning approaches, utilisation of instructional materials, and, differentiated teaching strategies in multigrade classrooms. These findings offer practical insights into ESL teaching in multigrade settings and have implications for teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and other educational stakeholders seeking to support effective instruction in rural low enrolment schools.

Introduction

Mastering a second language is a complex process encompassing vocabulary development, reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. This process is influenced by cognitive, affective, personal, and environmental factors. Among these, the school environment is critical, encompassing academic, sociocultural, and physical conditions that shape teaching, learning, and overall student performance. A conducive school environment includes adequate physical infrastructure, instructional materials, manageable class sizes, and resource accessibility.

Low Enrolment Schools (LES), also known as *Sekolah Kurang Murid (SKM)* in Malaysia, face unique challenges in creating a supportive learning environment. These schools have fewer than 150 students each, with little resources, infrastructure and properly functioning staff too. They are often located in rural areas where the number of students enrolled is limited by socioeconomic difficulties, migration, and geographic isolation (Renganathan, 2023).

To overcome the challenges inherent in the educational context, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has adopted the implementation of multigrade classrooms, which combine two different year groups under the supervision of a single teacher. Although the approach of multigrade teaching is not a novel concept, educators must evolve their pedagogical methodologies to effectively cater to a range of age groups and varying levels of ability within the same class. This is of utmost importance to create a learning environment that meets the needs of all students. In settings such as this, effective strategies such as differentiated instruction, communicative teaching or authentic materials are essential in order to achieve an effective learning environment.

Despite the difficulties, LES is essential in providing educational opportunities to underprivileged populations. The focus on effective pedagogical practice can enable teachers to enhance, to a significant degree, the learning of the English language and the academic achievement of students in these unique settings.

Background Of the Study

Quality education is a fundamental human right and key to societal development. However, low enrolment in schools, such that only a proportion of prospective learners are registered in official education remains a phenomenon. The problem is even worse in rural settings,

disadvantaged communities, and low socioeconomic statuses. Despite an increased global drive for heightened enrolment, there still remain discrepancies, particularly in disadvantaged localities.

One of the solutions to the issue of low enrolment is the implementation of multigrade classes, where pupils of various grades are taught by a single teacher in a composite classroom. In Malaysia, this is a common practice in low enrolment schools, especially rural schools that have fewer than 30 students per school. Bjøru (2023) highlighted that there are 432 schools in Malaysia with student numbers ranging from one to 30. These schools, often situated in remote villages or along riverbanks, encompass national, Chinese, and Tamil educational institutions. This study discusses the instructional strategies employed by Malaysian multigrade English as a second language (ESL) teacher. Multigrade teaching requires special instructional strategies to coordinate the different learning needs of students of two grade levels in one classroom. The present study identifies how teachers plan lessons, adjust instructional materials, and organize class activities to impart English lessons effectively in such classrooms. This research will give meaningful contributions to enhance multigrade teaching practices by identifying and analyzing successful teaching strategies. Through an analysis of the most effective strategies in this instance, ESL instructors will gain knowledge on how to apply effective measures to enhance learning outcomes and maximize multigrade education's potential.

Statement of Problem

English as a Second Language (ESL) education is critical for language learning in rural schools, where multigrade classrooms are common. These classrooms, which combine students from different grades under one teacher, present unique instructional challenges, especially in low enrolment rural schools in Peninsular Malaysia. Despite the prevalence of multigrade teaching in these settings, limited research explores how ESL teachers adapt their teaching approaches in order to accommodate diverse student needs.

Malaysia, with its geographical and cultural diversity, faces many challenges in rural education. Many rural schools are located in remote areas, accessible only by limited infrastructure, further complicating educational access and quality (UNESCO, 1989). Low enrolment schools with fewer than 30 students often exhibit lower academic performance and require innovative teaching approaches. Furthermore, the challenge of delivering ESL instruction in such schools further intensified, as ESL teachers are required to simultaneously address learners from different grade levels and varying language proficiency within a single instructional setting (Kumar et al, 2024).

Next, existing literature on multigrade teaching in Malaysia concentrates mostly on Sabah and Sarawak, with relatively less concentration on Peninsular Malaysia. Furthermore, the majority of the studies emphasize problems associated with multigrade teaching with a limited focus on how teachers manage such problems. Effective multigrade teaching demands that teachers develop flexible lesson plans, adapt instructional materials, and employ various teaching approaches to meet mixed-grade classrooms.

Hence, the aim of this research is to examine the pedagogical practice of ESL teachers in Malaysian multigrade rural low enrolment schools. Even though previous studies have examined multigrade teaching in rural contexts, limited attention has been given to how ESL teachers manage lesson delivery across different grade levels within the same instructional

period. This gap is particularly evident in low enrolment schools, where teachers are required to simultaneously address varying language proficiency levels and curricular demands.

Significance of the Research

This study highlights the importance of effective pedagogical practices among ESL teachers in multigrade classes of low enrolment rural schools in peninsular Malaysia. This is corroborated by research conducted by Hiew (2023), who indicated that very few studies have been conducted on multigrade classrooms in Malaysia. Thus, there exists an urgent need for additional research which aims to provide meaningful insights into how teachers might construct personalized pedagogical approaches that respond to students' varying levels of proficiency. By drawing attention to these approaches, the research offers ESL instructors concrete suggestions for creating engaging lessons that meet the varied needs of multigrade students.

Moreover, the findings will help ESL teachers overcome the obstacles of teaching mixed-grade classrooms by giving them strategies that help to promote communication, improve students' engagement, and promote effective learning environments. The research will also supply teachers with knowledge to overcome obstacles of teaching English, particularly in rural areas, where resources are scarce and students have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In addition, the research adds policy-relevant information to policymakers and schools about the unique needs of ESL teachers in multigrade environments. The results can inform better policies, teacher training courses, and support systems suitable for multigrade learning environments. Teachers can benefit from the results by maximizing lesson planning, increasing efficiency, and improving teaching skills.

Finally, this research is relevant in improving the quality of ESL teaching in multigrade schools so that students from low enrolment schools are provided with quality language education. Moreover, it addresses the limited body of research on ESL teaching in multigrade schools in Malaysia and contributes meaningfully to this under researched area with knowledge and suggestions applicable to similar educational settings.

Research Objective and Research Question

The following is the research question of this study:
Research question: How do ESL teachers deliver lessons in multigrade classrooms?
Research objective: To examine the implementation of multigrade classroom settings at selected rural low enrolment schools in Peninsular Malaysia.

Literature Review

This study has thoroughly reviewed various literary works that align with the topics pertinent to the current research paper. The reviewed literature has been systematically categorized into several sections, which encompass the Theoretical Framework, rural schools, low enrolment schools, and the dynamics of multigrade classrooms, particularly in the context of Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Learning Environment, Learning Processes, and Learning Outcomes (LEPO) framework. The LEPO framework conceptualizes teaching and learning as an interconnected system consisting of three key components: the learning environment, the instructional processes, and the resulting learning outcomes. The framework draws from the foundational principles of effective undergraduate education proposed by Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson (1987), which emphasize active learning, student engagement, collaboration, and prompt feedback. This assists in describing how learning settings are established, how teaching-learning processes are initiated, and how evaluations are performed to analyze the achievement of learning results, but with attention to how these elements interact with each other in order to make educational experiences richer.

In the context of multigrade classrooms, the LEPO framework provides a useful lens for examining how teachers structure the learning environment (e.g., grouping strategies, classroom organisation), implement instructional processes (e.g., alternating instructional focus, peer-assisted learning, differentiated strategies), and influence learning outcomes across different grade levels. The framework guided the design of the interview protocol, classroom observation checklist, and lesson plan analysis by focusing on how teachers organise the physical and instructional environment in multigrade settings, implement pedagogical strategies to address diverse learner needs, and monitor and evaluate student progress across grades.

Furthermore, the thematic analysis of the findings was interpreted through the LEPO lens, particularly in understanding how instructional adaptations in multigrade classrooms contribute to effective learning processes and outcomes. By applying the LEPO framework, this study systematically examines the dynamic relationship between classroom structure, teaching strategies, and student learning in rural low enrolment ESL classrooms.

Rural Schools

Rural schools are located in remote, less densely populated areas, often far from urban centers. Herzog (1995) noted that "rural" is often defined from an urban perspective, much like how dominant cultures traditionally define minority groups. Rural school characteristics that differentiate them from others include limited student numbers, limited resources, fewer extracurricular activities, and challenges in the recruitment of teachers. These schools experience smaller class sizes and close-knit communities but lack diversity and opportunity that exists in city schools (McCracken, 1991).

According to McCracken (1991), rural students are normally more homogeneous in terms of ethics compared to their urban counterparts, with urban students being more diverse in culture. Such restricted exposure to diversely mixed groups tends to hinder the sociological and educational development of rural students. Rural households also have lower socioeconomic status (SES), higher family sizes, and lower education levels among parents compared to urban families.

Meanwhile, Du Plessis (2014) defined South African rural schools as those found on peripheries or farm-like settlements. He highlighted issues such as the absence of resources,

difficulties in the recruitment of quality teachers, and the use of teachers carrying out multiple functions. These are restrictive factors for implementing changes in education in rural schools. On the other hand, Rahman (1993) studied rural schools in Kelantan, Malaysia, and reported that 70% of the teachers were male since they could manage transport and accommodation issues better than their female counterparts. Most of the teachers were Malay, and principals reported lateness and reluctance to participate in co-curricular activities. These problems were partly due to teachers absenting themselves from school since there was little local accommodation. These challenges need to be overcome in order to deliver quality and fair education in rural schools.

Low Enrolment Schools

Low enrolment schools, also known as small-size or declining enrolment schools, face unique challenges due to having fewer students compared to larger institutions. This global issue impacts educational equity, resource allocation, and sustainability, particularly in rural and remote areas. In Malaysia, 26.5% of primary schools are categorized as small, with some schools having fewer than 30 students (Mansor, 2022). These schools play a critical role in providing education to underserved communities, often serving as the sole source of education in isolated areas. However, they face sustainability challenges due to low enrolment and limited funding, which impact the quality of education and infrastructure.

According to Thien and Lee (2023), smaller schools foster a sense of community and belonging, allowing for more individualized attention and higher student engagement. Despite these benefits, low enrolment schools in Malaysia struggle with an inadequate number of teachers, often lacking expert educators. Thien and Lee's study of 452 Malaysian primary school teachers highlights the disparities in teacher well-being between low and high enrolment schools, emphasizing the difficulty of ensuring quality education in small schools.

In terms of economics, smaller schools are less efficient due to higher per-pupil costs. For instance, the government's expenditure per pupil in schools with 1–150 students is RM 1396.72, compared to RM 595.89 in schools with 1201–1500 students (Nor & Husin, 2013). These schools often suffer from poor infrastructure, low teacher quality, and student performance issues, making improvement challenging.

However, despite these challenges, closing small schools would negatively impact underserved communities and hinder Malaysia's efforts to achieve educational equity. Thus, addressing the unique needs of low enrolment schools is essential to ensuring that all children, regardless of location, have access to quality education.

Multigrade Classroom in Malaysia

A multigrade classroom consists of a combination of students from two different grades together in one class. These students, even though from different grades, will have to learn the same level of curriculum together at the same time. As stated by Daga (2021), multigrade classrooms are designed to deliver effective instruction to a class of learners composed of various grades, ages, and capabilities with only one teacher assigned who capitalizes on multi-levelled instruction. So, they are distinct from split classes, which are created when there are not enough students to form two separate single grade classes.

In Malaysia the curriculum for multigrade teaching schools is similar to that for single-grade teaching schools (UNESCO, 1995). In this situation, teachers in multigrade settings must adapt the existing curriculum to suit their specific circumstances. This indicates that the Ministry of Education in Malaysia does not provide a distinct curriculum tailored for multigrade classrooms; rather, it falls upon the teachers to modify the single-grade curriculum to fit the unique dynamics of a multigrade environment. In this case, if there is a commonality, whole-class instruction may be used; if not, group techniques are probably going to be applied.

The history of multi-graded classes started when British colonization began in the country, and it was known as Multiple Class Teaching. Multiple class teaching was conducted in the lower primary school due to the minimal number of teachers and lack of basic facilities such as classrooms and board (Ponniah, 2020). It shows that the implementation of multigrade classrooms is not new in Malaysia and is conducted in primary schools with a low number of enrolments, but with a set of challenges.

Methodology

This section explains the method adopted by this research. It explains every component involved in conducting this research, from the research design, respondents, sampling methods, instruments, and data collection procedure. Finally, this section provides a detailed description of the chosen mode of analysis used and the data collection method.

Research Design

This study takes a qualitative approach to look into teaching strategies in multigrade ESL classrooms, gathering detailed insights from those involved. Qualitative research is widely used in education and social sciences because it digs into cultural settings, beliefs, and personal views (Mocănașu, 2020; Teherani, 2015).

This descriptive research utilizes semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis to explore the phenomena under investigation. Semi-structured interviews allow participants the opportunity to express their thoughts and experiences while enabling the researcher to delve into emerging themes through a conversational method. This approach brings out the participants' views on their teaching methods in multigrade classrooms.

Classroom observation complements interviews by capturing actual teaching practices, which helps us see how multigrade classrooms operate. Next, analyzing the content of teachers' lesson plans and instructional materials helps to better understand the strategies and adjustments utilized in multigrade environments. This thorough approach provides a detailed understanding of the teaching and learning dynamics in multigrade classrooms.

Respondents

To achieve the objectives of this research, the researcher has set specific criteria for the sampling that are selected to take part in this research, in which this research only focuses on low enrolment schools located in Peninsular Malaysia, and only national schools (SK) are selected. 8 teachers from 8 low enrolment schools located in Johor, Pahang, Perak, and Selangor are selected as these states have high numbers of low enrolment schools that fulfil the criteria needed. The sample size was deemed sufficient as the study aimed for depth of

understanding rather than generalisation, with data saturation observed across interviews and classroom observations. The researcher chooses to include these 4 states to represent 4 zones in Peninsular Malaysia.

1. East Malaysia – Pahang
2. North Malaysia – Perak
3. South Malaysia – Johor
4. Central Malaysia – Selangor

Choosing schools from each state helps to reflect the educational situation across the whole country and avoid bias that might come from focusing too much on specific areas. This aligns with the goal of the research, which is to provide detailed descriptions of the school system and support evidence-based policies for educational improvements. In addition, this is to offset possible bias that would occur due to the selective sampling of particular areas. Thus, it is in line with the aims of this research, which seeks to generate detailed descriptions of the whole school system and evidence-based policies that inform educational improvement.

Sampling Method

Respondents' choice is a critical element of research design, as it offers applicable and credible information for the accomplishment of research objectives. Purposive sampling is utilized in this research, whereby participants are deliberately selected based on specific criteria regarding the research. Campbell (2020) supports the point that purposive sampling has the role of placing the sample into perspective in terms of research objectives, thus boosting the methodological rigour and validity of the study.

Eight ESL teachers from four Malaysian states, Johor, Pahang, Perak, and Selangor, were selected for this study, and two teachers from each state participated. This number was based on data saturation, which happens when no new information comes from additional data, meaning the sample size is enough to capture the range and depth of the topic in question (Seidman, 2006; Mthuli, 2022). Single case studies often have 4 to 10 participants (Stake, 2006), and multiple case studies usually have 4 to 5 (Creswell, 2014). The eight participants fit well within these recommendations.

Bekele (2022) and Bryman (2012) highlight the importance of balancing sample size in qualitative research, aiming for depth and not excessive detail. A sample that is too small may lack sufficient depth, whereas a sample that is too large may inhibit in-depth examination. The chosen ESL teachers fit the criteria specified for this study and cover a range of rural educational settings, thereby allowing a detailed examination of the research purposes. This process of systematic and purposeful choice enhances the reliability, representativeness, and worth of the findings, thereby adding richness to the overall validity and relevancy of the study.

Instruments

The researcher applies three different data collection techniques to gather sufficient and pertinent data to meet the study's research objectives. The methods are described below:

Semi-structured Interview

This study employs semi-structured interviews to explore teaching strategies in multigrade classrooms within Malaysian rural schools. Semi-structured interviews involving prepared, yet flexible questions are compelling for obtaining primary data through meaningful dialogue (Al Balushi, 2016). Using an interview protocol, as suggested by Creswell (2013), ensures organized and objective questioning while allowing for notetaking and recording.

The interview questions explore the dynamics of multigrade classes and their implications for teachers' instructional practices. The method facilitates a two-way communication process in which respondents provide accounts and reconstruct details evoked by the interview questions. Data collected using the method becomes rich in terms of giving information about the instructional approaches employed by the teachers.

Classroom Observations

This study employs non-participant classroom observation to explore teaching strategies in ESL multigrade classrooms and the challenges faced by teachers. Observation provides first-hand, unbiased data without influencing the environment or participants (Patton, 2014). As a non-participant observer, the researcher documents teacher behaviours and classroom dynamics from a distance, ensuring objectivity (Ciesielska et al., 2018).

The observation instrument is designed to align with the semi-structured interview axes, which focus on pedagogical practices in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in multigrade settings. One lesson per teacher per observation is documented, enabling willing observation and thorough documentation for accuracy. Through this method, rich meanings are generated regarding the distinct pedagogical practices typical of multigrade school contexts.

Lesson Plan Analysis

To supplement the observation data, triangulation of findings is derived from analyzing documentary data. Content analysis involves the systematic examination of documents, such as lesson plans, worksheets, and textbook units, to uncover patterns and themes (Gheyle, 2017). This method gives more insightful information on teaching approaches employed by teachers. ESL lesson plans prepared were examined before classroom observations, so this analysis is placed within themes derived from interviews and observations. The triangulation offers a comprehensive investigation of multigrade teaching practice. Content analysis enhances research validity and reliability by the discovery of in-depth information, which might be overlooked by other methods (Morgan, 2022). By adding content analysis, the study aims to determine how to teach more effectively in multigrade classrooms.

Data Collection Procedure

This research follows qualitative inquiry and case study research methodologies, utilizing semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis as methods for data collection. The process begins with obtaining a list of low enrolment schools in Malaysia that implement multigrade classrooms, which is downloaded from the Ministry of Education's portal in Malaysia. The researchers subsequently narrowed down their initial list of schools based on the four predetermined criteria established prior to the selection process. They focused

on schools located in Perak, Selangor, Johor, and Negeri Sembilan, ensuring representation from all four zones of Peninsular Malaysia. After preparing the final list of schools, the researcher sought approval and permission from the Education Policy Planning and Research Division (BPPDP) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) by utilizing the Educational Research Application System (eRAS 2.0) to carry out the research at the selected institutions.

After receiving approval from the Education Policy Planning and Research Division (BPPDP) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), the researchers submitted an application letter to the Department of State Education for Johor, Perak, Pahang, and Selangor to seek further approval. Once this approval was granted, a formal letter was sent to the selected schools to obtain permission to conduct research on their premises. The formal letter also stated some information required to proceed with the research, such as the number of ESL teachers and their contact details, and the number of multigrade classrooms at that respected school. As soon as the researcher receives feedback from the schools with the information needed and permission to proceed with the research, the researcher then continues contacting the ESL teachers to inform them of the purpose. The researcher ensures the ESL teachers provide verbal or written consent before scheduling interviews and class observations. Once consent is obtained, the interviews take place at the teacher's school for their convenience, and they are given the autonomy to select the location, such as their classroom or the teacher's lounge, where they feel comfortable for the interview. To help everyone feel ready for the interview, the researcher takes a moment just before starting to explain the research project's goals. This little chat lasts around 5 to 8 minutes and gives a clear picture of what to expect during the interview process. This is one of the ways to ease any nerves and set the stage for an open conversation. The teachers are assured that measures will be taken to protect their privacy, including anonymizing their information and using it strictly for research objectives rather than sharing it publicly. The interview took around 30 to 45 minutes, varying slightly based on the level of detail and reflection each teacher provided in their responses to the questions.

Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative research seeks to identify patterns and generate insights through an inductive process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The analysis of data is essential in this process. Creswell (2009) emphasizes that it involves preparing data, conducting reviews, understanding the data, and interpreting its broader meaning. This study uses thematic analysis for data from interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis to explore teaching strategies in multigrade ESL classrooms.

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation enhances validity by combining interviews, observations, and content analysis (Stake, 2006). It checks interpretations, reduces bias, and fully accounts for teaching strategies in multigrade classrooms. Triangulation ensures credible findings that promote policymaking, research, and educational practices. This process entails the use of multiple data sources to establish effective strategies for overcoming challenges in multigrade ESL classrooms, yielding valuable insights into the practice.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation, involving semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan analysis, which allowed findings to be cross validated across multiple data sources.

Member checking was conducted informally during and after the interviews, enabling participants to clarify and confirm the accuracy of their responses. Dependability was addressed through a systematic and iterative coding process, where interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were analysed repeatedly to refine emerging themes.

Confirmability was supported through reflexive awareness and regular supervisory discussions to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than researcher assumptions. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and instructional practices, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar multigrade ESL settings.

Results

This section outlines the findings and discussions of the study, structured around the research question, which has been thoroughly investigated and analyzed in connection with the main themes that surfaced. The findings of this study are articulated through an analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with eight ESL teachers, who served as the primary sources of data. The verbatim accounts of the participants are included in this section. Additionally, the analysis of the written exercises performed by the participants is presented in conjunction with the interview results. The verbal feedback obtained during the interview sessions is condensed using a shorthand format. For instance, in the case of Wafi_int, "Wafi" is a pseudonym for the participant, while "int" stands for "interview." Similarly, responses from the written accounts are presented using this shorthand format; for example, Wafi_obs refers to the participant's pseudonym and "obs" denotes "classroom observation," while Wafi_lp uses "lp" to represent "lesson plan."

Table 1 below presents a comprehensive outline of the themes identified through the analysis of the findings. The analysis presented in Table 1 reveals the identification of six themes: (1) the alternating focus between varying grade levels, (2) the alignment of skills and topics across different grades, (3) the role of peer-assisted learning, (4) the preparation of lesson plans, (5) the utilization of instructional materials in multigrade classrooms, and (6) the implementation of differentiated teaching strategies tailored for multigrade educational settings. Under each of these themes, some specific sub-themes were also identified, as depicted in the table.

RQ: How Do ESL Teachers Deliver Lessons in Multigrade Classrooms?

Table 1: Findings For Research Question

Themes:	Theme 1: Alternating instructional focus	Theme 2: Skills and topics alignment across grades	Theme 3: Peer-assisted learning	Theme 4: Multigrade classrooms lesson plan preparation	Theme 5: Materials in multigrade classrooms	Theme 6: Differentiated teaching strategies for multigrade classrooms
Sub-themes	Alternating focus between different grades	Integration of activities and skills to optimize learning outcomes	Student mentorship as teaching tool	Modify and adapt readily available lesson plan	The use of readily available materials	Direct observation and ongoing evaluation within the classroom setting
		Ensuring similar main skill continuity in multigrade settings		Blending of different grades in a lesson plan	Preference for different materials across grades	Enhancing comprehension and engagement through code-mixing
				Dual lesson plan		Adapting to student levels and providing individualized attention
						Encouraging self-confidence in diverse learners
						Grade-specific assessments
						Flexibility in lesson sequence

Alternating Instructional Focus

The first theme that emerged from the findings is 'Alternating Instructional Focus,' which is a teaching strategy employed in multigrade classrooms. Majority of the teachers reported that they will flip their lesson across grades during the lesson. This is a process where the teacher switches between various grades within the course of instruction, thereby providing a more inclusive learning platform that addresses the needs of multiple groups of students at once. For

example, if one hour is devoted to a lesson, the teacher may begin by teaching the Year 2 students for 15 minutes and then the Year 3 students for the subsequent 15 minutes. This pattern continues as the teacher revisits each grade until the lesson concludes. When discussing strategies for teaching in a multigrade classroom, Uma reported that:

> *Let's say Year 4 I will teach this side first; I explain to them. And then year 5, I give them work. Then I go to year 5 and teach them, because their topics are different.*

(Uma_int 24)

A similar strategy has been reported by Zan_int, who indicated that she employs a strategy of alternating focus by dividing her lesson plans into two segments, each tailored to address the distinct needs of the respective grade levels:

I divide it into two because there are two classes. How am I supposed to teach…if we follow the Lesson Plan, it's 1 hour, right? So, I really have to cut it, compress it to something like…half an hour teaching. For example, earlier I taught Year 2, gave them related exercises first, then…umm…I taught Year 3 first. Around 30 minutes like that, then I had to switch to Year 2.

(Zan_int 18)

Parallel to the results from interview findings, a notable trend in instructional focus emerged from both classroom observations and the analysis of lesson plan documents. It was observed that teachers frequently alternate their focus among different grade levels within a single lesson, maintaining this strategy throughout the class, as follows:

Teacher continued lesson with Year 2 students first, while Year 3 were not instructed to do anything, so it was observed that they were just sitting and keep quiet. After a few minutes of a lesson with Year 2 students, the teacher gave a task to them to complete tasks page 46 and 47, where they had to colour, cut and paste. While Year 2 students were completing their work, the teacher then called two Year 3 students to come in front at the teacher's table, and they had to bring their books as well. The teacher then played audio for listening activity for Year 3.

(Haz_obs)

This tailored approach acknowledges the unique complexities of managing diverse educational needs and promotes a cohesive learning experience for all students.

Skills And Topics Alignment Across Grades

The second theme from the findings is 'Skills and topics alignment across grades. Respondents reported that they will ensure skills and topics taught for both grades are aligned in teaching multigrade classrooms. Wafi reported:

So, most of the time, I will choose one skill, similar skill for both of the class, both of the years. But then, the context, the activity, I will try to follow their textbook.

(Wafi_int 46)

That is, the teachers in multigrade classes will make sure that they are teaching the same skills for both grades, even though they may have different lesson objectives. Siva in the interview also attested to the same:

So, you must have same skill. I think you know already, must teach the same skill, with topic you can..same topic also can. So, I just put the same topic and the same skill. But the lesson of course will be different.

(Siva_int 34)

This strategy promotes uniformity in skill development while permitting adaptability in lesson content, as demonstrated by teachers' accounts of aligning skills and topics to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Peer-Assisted Learning

The third established theme is 'Peer-assisted learning.' This concept arises from the teachers' verbal accounts, indicating that students in the same grade will assist their peers who struggle with completing tasks or assignments, allowing the teacher to concentrate on students from other grades. The interviewed teachers have shared the following:

Sometimes, I ask the more advanced students to act as mentors, to help their friends... to assist and check on their classmates' work.

(Nor_int 70)

Sometimes, when I'm teaching, the quicker students, you know, I ask them to help their friends, to be their mentors. Because as a teacher, I can't exactly split myself in two.

(Zan_int 220)

Similarly, a notable pattern is documented in the observation notes, as follows:

When the teacher asked the students on the work progress, it is observed that only one student raised up her hands while the other students did not give any response. Teacher then asked the student (the one who raised her hands to check on her friends' works. Then continued to continue lesson with Year 2 students, while the chosen student stands up and walk towards her friends.

(Nor_obs)

In conclusion, the theme of Peer-assisted learning highlights the collaborative dynamic within multigrade classrooms, where students actively support their peers who face challenges in completing tasks. The practice underscores the value of student collaboration as a practical strategy to address the unique demands of multigrade teaching.

Multigrade Classrooms Lesson Plan Preparation

The subsequent thematic analysis yielded the theme of "Multigrade Classroom Lesson Plan Preparation." Within this theme, three distinct sub-themes emerged: modifying and adapting pre-existing lesson plans, blending different grades in a lesson plan, and formulating dual

lesson plans. This shows that there is more than one way of preparing lesson plan for multigrade classrooms. For instance, Zan reported that she always has dual lesson plans every time she has a lesson with her multigrade classroom:

Yes, two lesson plans. Yes, definitely two, since before this, it has always been two.

(Zan_int 56)

As for Uma, she mentioned that she plans to combine both lessons into one cohesive lesson plan. She intends to organize it in a way that builds on each step progressively:
Let's say step 1 I put Year 4, then step 2 I put Year 5.

(Uma_int 68)

The findings derived from the content analysis reveal a consistent trend in the formulation of lesson plans. Notably, it was observed that the teacher merges both subject areas into one single lesson plan. This is demonstrated in the following example of a lesson plan prepared by Iqa:

This highlights the extensive variety of methods to lesson planning in multigrade classrooms, spotlighting the essential qualities of flexibility and adaptability, along with carefully tailored instructional strategies designed to meet each student's unique needs.

Materials In Multigrade Classrooms

The fifth theme identified pertains to the materials employed in multigrade classrooms. Teachers operating within multigrade environments noted a reliance on readily accessible resources, including worksheets and textbooks. Furthermore, they preferred utilizing diverse materials tailored to the varying educational needs of students across different grade levels within the same instructional setting. Below are the insights shared by teachers during the interview:

I mainly focus on using workbooks because they're already prepared and available, so why not use them? They're very relevant, and the syllabus aligns well. However, every time I prepare teaching aids, it always has to be... everything is double.

(Nor_int 58)

Usually, the subjects and topics are different. One might be 'Food' while the other is 'Body Parts.' They're completely different, so I have to prepare two separate ones.

(Zan_int 182)

The insights given show that teachers in multigrade classrooms in multigrade classes mostly employ readily available materials, and two different materials' preparation across grades in the same class context is required. The same pattern was also observed at the classroom observation:

After few minutes of lesson, the teacher then started class activity. 10 minutes were given for class activity, with different activities for Year 4 and Year 5 students. For Year 5, teacher instructed students to sit anywhere they want in order to complete the activity, thus few students were observed sat on the floor (3 pairs of students on the floor, and 1 pair on their table). For Year 4, teacher instructed them to turn to page 74 of their workbook.

(Wafi_obs)

Therefore, this theme underscores the critical role of adaptable and accessible teaching materials in addressing the diverse needs of multigrade classrooms.

Differentiated Teaching Strategies for Multigrade Classrooms

The sixth theme, which arose from the findings, is differentiated instructional strategies specific to multigrade classrooms. This practice involves the intentional planning and development of instruction to address the diverse learning needs, competencies, and interests of learners in multigrade learning contexts. There are six sub-themes identified under this category namely, direct observation and ongoing evaluation within the classroom setting, enhancing comprehension and engagement through code-mixing, adapting to student levels and providing individualized attention, encouraging self-confidence in diverse learners, grade-specific assessments and flexibility in lesson sequence. This is in line with Galope (2024), who highlights that differentiation and individualization are essential approaches in multigrade classrooms. Teacher Wafi during the interview revealed that:

Sometimes I if I find out that the student is really struggling so I ask him or her to come and sit beside me for me to guide.

(Wafi_int 68)

This suggests that this theme focuses on the value of differentiated teaching strategies in developing practical and inclusive multigrade classrooms. By applying specific strategies such as individual instruction, flexible sequencing of lessons, and grade-level assessments, teachers can meet the various needs of learners with varied abilities.

Conclusion

In general, this study provides new information about the strategies adopted by ESL teachers in multigrade classrooms, focusing on rural, low enrolment schools in Malaysia. Six key themes emerged, highlighting diverse approaches to lesson delivery, peer-assisted learning, material adaptation, and differentiated teaching strategies. These findings emphasize the need for teachers to be adaptable and creative in addressing the challenges of teaching students with varying levels of proficiency and educational needs in a shared classroom setting.

By exploring techniques such as alternating instructional focus, aligning skills and topics across grades, and employing peer-assisted learning, this study underscores the importance of fostering collaboration and inclusivity in multigrade classrooms. Teachers' use of tailored lesson plans and differentiated teaching strategies further demonstrates their commitment to meeting the unique demands of multigrade teaching environments.

The study also highlights the significance of accessible teaching materials and the thoughtful integration of resources to enhance learning experiences across grades. These insights provide a deeper understanding of how multigrade classrooms can be effectively managed to promote meaningful learning outcomes.

Overall, this research informs educators, policymakers, and stakeholders about best practices and strategies for improving ESL instruction in multigrade settings, offering a foundation for enhancing education quality in similar contexts.

Ethics Statement:	This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Education Policy Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), State Departments of Education (Johor, Pahang, Perak and Selangor) approval number [KPM.600-3/2/3-eras (20836)]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.
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