

Teaching Through Hope and Growth: A Critical Incident Study of Gen Z Novice EFL Teachers in Rural Kalimantan Barat

Anatasia Keny¹, Paulus Kuswando²

^{1,2}*Universitas Sanata Dharma*

anakeny211@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The professional development of novice teachers has nowadays become an urgent concern, particularly in rural areas where contextual challenges are complex and multifaceted. While formal training continues to dominate professional development discourse, there is growing recognition that critical, emotionally charged experiences, often unplanned and situated within local realities, play a pivotal role in shaping teacher identity and growth. This research aims to investigate how critical professional experiences influence the development of five Gen Z novice English teachers in rural Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia. Beyond classroom-centered perspectives, this study examines incidents arising from interactions with school leaders, peers, parents, and the broader community. Guided by a qualitative interpretive paradigm, this research adopts the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and uses thematic analysis, the research captures the data through semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives. Findings indicate that critical incidents not only challenge novice teachers emotionally and pedagogically but also serve as catalysts for reflection, adaptation, and resilience. The study highlights the value of context-specific, experiential learning in fostering professional growth. These results suggest the need for localized, reflective professional development and rural-responsive educational policies.

Keywords: Critical incident technique, Gen Z, novice EFL teachers, rural education, teacher professional development

Received: 04-09-2025	Revised: 19-10-2025	Accepted: 26-10-2025
-------------------------	------------------------	-------------------------

INTRODUCTION

The teaching profession is often considered one of the most demanding and difficult jobs (Chandran et al., 2022). Teacher professional development (TPD) is crucial for teachers, especially amidst the rapid development of English language teaching (Varghese et al., 2005). Avalos (2011) highlights teacher professional development (TPD) as an ongoing learning journey that shapes teachers' beliefs about teaching, improves their classroom practices, supports student learning, and ultimately contributes to overall growth. This definition emphasizes that TPD is both personal and

context-bound, shaped by teachers' beliefs, the schools, and the students that aim to support teachers in becoming more confident, adaptable, and effective. In fact, at the TESOL Summit 2018 in Jakarta, teachers expressed the need for a TPD approach that facilitates them in sharing professional experiences with other teachers. However, the challenge is that TPD is influenced by various aspects both internal and external (Lomi & Mbato, 2020).

The current teaching workforce is increasingly dominated by Gen Z who grew up in the digital era, socially conscious, pragmatic, entrepreneurial, and value authenticity, diversity, and mental well-being (Dania et al., 2023; Lazar et al., 2023). Gen Z is fluent with technology, preference for flexible and ethical work environments, and high awareness of mental health making them distinct from previous generations (Dania et al., 2023). They have different characteristics and expectations than previous generations. The study of Gen Z novice teachers has a very important role in addressing the various issues they face in the early years of their teaching careers both internal and external. Internally, many experience self-doubt and negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and frustration when dealing with unexpected classroom situations (Anselma & Mbato, 2023; Lomi & Mbato, 2020; Septiani et al., 2019). They are also frequently expected by principals or supervisors to perform like experienced teachers from day one, these high expectations and institutional pressures count as the external factors that tend to hinder their professional identity development (Anselma & Mbato, 2023; Averina & Kuswandono, 2022; Sanam et al., 2021). However, the challenges encountered during this formative period may substantially influence the development of their professional identity (Averina & Kuswandono, 2022).

Rural areas especially in *Kalimantan Barat* present distinct challenges for novice EFL teachers, including limited access to resources, infrastructural constraints, and cultural diversity (Anselma & Mbato, 2023). However, it also offers meaningful experiences that spark reflection and growth, and professional development programs should be tailored to these realities by integrating reflective practices, building peer networks, and leveraging flexible technology-based delivery methods that suit Gen Z teachers (Wijaya & Kuswandono, 2018). This research draws attention to the informal and experience-based learning that arises from critical professional experiences. Flanagan (1954) introduced the Critical Incident Technique as a systematic method for collecting and analyzing data concerning human behaviour in meaningful and contextually significant real-world situations. (Çukur, 2022) Identifying and reflecting on critical incidents enables teachers to evaluate their practices and develop more effective instructional strategies. Nurteteng et al. (2024) emphasize, teachers in rural areas in Indonesia often transform classroom challenges into opportunities for professional and personal growth through reflective engagement and contextual innovation. It shows that hope and adaptability can emerge even in the absence of formal institutional support.

Recent research has increasingly highlighted the role of critical incidents in shaping English EFL teachers' professional development. Some incidents experienced by teachers are no longer understood as mere obstacles in the teaching process, but rather as turning points that encourage teachers to reflect on their teaching methods which are expected to strengthen their ability to adapt to the dynamic reality of the classroom. (Çukur, 2022; Wijaya & Kuswandono, 2018). The teacher's professional development is also influenced by critical incidents, especially those involving emotional stress and professional challenges, such as burnout, structural constraints, and unexpected situations in the classroom (Anselma & Mbato, 2023; Ikrar & Baa, 2023). These experiences often lead novice teachers to reevaluate their roles and sense of agency,

contributing to a more resilient or aspirational professional self. However, many novice teachers still tend to rely on intuitive and practice-based knowledge rather than basing their decisions on theoretical frameworks (Ikrar & Baa, 2023). This dependence often causes gaps in the learning process of teachers, which can hinder their professional development. According to Wijaya & Kuswandono (2018), regular reflection through journals, mentoring, or discussions with fellow teachers can help improve adaptability and self-awareness. In teaching English as a foreign language, professional development should be supported by an approach that encourages teachers to think critically, connect theory with practice, and shape their professional identity.

Research on professional development and the role of critical events of Gen Z novice teachers in rural areas, particularly in Kalimantan Barat, remains limited. In contrast, previous studies have largely focused on teacher professional development in general characteristics of novice teachers, lacking the context of urban versus rural settings and Gen Z novice teachers as the underlying features. To address this gap, this research investigates how critical events shape the professional development of Gen Z novice EFL teachers in rural Kalimantan Barat. Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) within a qualitative approach, the research captures teacher reflections and offers insights to improve their teaching method. The results are expected to provide valuable insights for the development of more relevant and effective programs for novice teachers in rural areas. This research is guided by the following question:

How do critical professional experiences shape the professional development of Gen Z novice EFL teachers in rural Kalimantan Barat?

METHOD

This study uses a thematic qualitative design with a Critical Incident Technique (CIT) approach to explore in depth the professional development experiences of novice EFL teachers. CIT is used to collect stories about important events that participants consider to have had a significant impact on their journey as teachers. According to Flanagan (1954), CIT is a method for systematically observing human behavior that holds significant meaning and meets specific criteria.

Five Gen Z novice EFL teachers from various rural areas in Kalimantan Barat participated in this study. Participants were selected purposely based on three criteria: Gen Z who was born between 1997–2012, novice teacher that has less than five years of teaching experience, and currently teaching English in a rural school. Further demographic details are provided in the table below.

TABLE 1 Participants Demography

No.	Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Teaching experience	Level of Teaching
1.	Ani	Female	2 years	Senior High School
2.	Budi	Male	1.5 years	Elementary School
3.	Cecil	Female	1 year	Senior High School
4.	Dina	Female	2.5 years	Junior High School
5.	Erika	Female	1 year	Senior High School

To ensure the quality and relevance of the data, the research instruments were compiled based on a conceptual framework blueprint that aligned with the literature reviews.

TABLE 2 Questionnaire Blueprint

No.	Description	Focus Area	Indicator	Theoretical Basis
1.	A professional teaching experience that generates pride and reflects the development of competence as a teacher.	Professional Growth	Teacher Pride, Teacher Self-Efficacy	Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1977)
2.	Classroom experiences that positively change perspectives on teaching.	Perspective Change	Teaching Approach, Teacher-Student Relationship	Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954)
3.	An inspiring moment from a student or colleague that drives motivation to grow professionally as a teacher.	Teacher Motivation	Teacher Inspiration, Intrinsic Motivation	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2004)
4.	Challenging teaching experiences can lead to feelings of unpreparedness and failure.	Resilience and Coping	Teaching Challenges, Emotional Responses	Teacher Resilience (Day & Gu, 2013)
5.	Challenging classroom teaching experiences that trigger uncertainty and a sense of overwhelm in determining the appropriate response as a teacher.	Teacher Stress	Coping Strategies, Overwhelm	Teacher Stress (Kyriacou, 2001)
6.	Experiences of emotional and mental fatigue encountered during the classroom teaching process.	Emotional Exhaustion	Burnout, Teacher Well-Being	Teacher Burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)

The data collection process began with a guided questionnaire shared via Google Forms through WhatsApp. This questionnaire was thoughtfully designed to encourage participants to write self-reflections about meaningful professional experiences they felt had a significant impact on their development as teachers. These reflections serve as the basis for the next stage of data collection, which involves semi-structured interviews. The interviews are used to explore participants' reflections more deeply, clarify their responses, and ensure data triangulation (Flanagan, 1954). Through both the reflective writing and the interviews, two main types of critical incidents emerged: the most rewarding and the most challenging moments in the participants' teaching experiences. Both the reflective journals and interviews were done in Indonesian. It allows the participants to express their thoughts and feelings freely. It also helps the participant to avoid language limitations that might restrict the authenticity of their responses.

Data Analysis began with the transcription of all interviews, ensuring they are transcribed Intelligence verbatim. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data. A combination of deductive coding and inductive coding will be used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial open coding will be followed by axial coding to identify connections, and selective coding to refine the core themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To maintain the reliability and accuracy of the research results, several steps will be taken, such as combining data from various sources and conducting member checks, which involve asking participants to review and confirm that the interpretation of their responses is accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS

This study analyzes data from semi-structured interviews and reflective journals of five Gen Z novice EFL teachers in rural West Kalimantan, using Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis. The results show that important professional experiences play a significant role in shaping the development of these teachers. From the data analysis, four main themes emerged: (1) Student Growth as a Catalyst for Teacher Development, (2) Pedagogical Adaptation and Reflective Practice, (3) Challenges of the Rural Classroom Context, (4) Emotional Labor and Resilience. These four main themes emerged from the analysis, each reflecting how particular experiences have significantly shaped the participants' professional growth.

TABLE 3 Themes and Descriptions

No.	Theme	Description of Theme
1.	Student Growth as a Catalyst for Teacher Development	The experience of seeing student growth is a significant moment that encourages teacher motivation and reflection.
2.	Pedagogical Adaptation and Reflective Practice	Teachers change their teaching approach based on challenging classroom experiences or self-reflection.
3.	Challenges of the Rural Classroom Context	Difficulties faced by teachers and students in rural areas such as students being tired, not familiar with English, or unfocused due to external factors.
4.	Emotional Labor and Resilience	Teachers experience burnout and emotional stress but develop strategies to recover and maintain their well-being.

Student Growth as a Catalyst for Teacher Development

The teachers' interviews revealed that observing their students' academic progress had significantly impacted their motivation. It also reinforced their sense of purpose in the profession. Some participants described moments of pride and fulfilment when their students achieved something previously unimaginable, and these milestones became powerful motivators in their professional journey. The following is the self-reflection journal from Ani that shared a powerful transformation in one of her students:

"There was one student who was very quiet in one of the classes I taught. For approximately 2 months I taught at that school, he looked more confident by answering

questions and reading English texts. I was very proud and happy to see his development and the confidence that he had been building for a long time. He taught me that every little thing needs progress." (Ani, reflective journal)

To reinforce the findings, Dina and Erika also admit that the most memorable and pleasant moment in teaching is seeing students grow. Budi stated that the most rewarding moment during their tenure as a teacher was witnessing students fully comprehend the material being delivered.

"Seeing the development of the students is a pleasant moment and I'm sure all teachers feel the same. I am so proud when students understand and learn well in my class." (Budi, interview)

These turning points symbolise the effectiveness of the teacher's guidance, reinforcing their identity as capable educators. Some moments served as emotional events that helped the teachers navigate the uncertainties of early-career teaching. The growth and success of their students reaffirmed their efforts and validated their presence in the classroom. In this way, the theme highlights how student growth is not only a product of teaching but also a driving force in the teacher's own development and strengthens their motivation and professional identity.

Pedagogical Adaptation and Reflective Practice

Another central theme concerns the continuous process of adapting teaching strategies in response to student needs and classroom realities. Participants often found themselves questioning and modifying their methods as they encountered challenges or unexpected outcomes. For instance, Ani described how understanding student personalities influenced her teaching approach:

"I thought about how I could also be a teacher that students like, that they can enjoy the learning process, and I realized that I had been teaching using only books and that was not interesting for them, which made me realize that I had to get out of my comfort zone so that students could learn well." (Ani, interview)

Along with the experience of teacher reflection and adaptation, Dina also reflected on a moment of realization that changed how she viewed her role as a teacher in the classroom. She admitted that reflection is a key for teachers to develop and grow day by day. The following is the self-reflection journal from Dina that shared the power of reflection in teacher professional development:

"Once, while explaining a lesson, I asked one student easy questions to make it interactive, but he couldn't answer. Then I asked another child. The first child was crying until the lesson ended. When I privately asked why, he said he felt inferior. This moment made me realize the importance of understanding students better and adapting teaching methods to support each child's learning positively. (Dina, reflective journal)

These reflections reflect a growing sensitivity to student diversity. It reveals how pedagogical innovation was often rooted in reflective practice, triggered by moments of difficulty or insight. The teachers' ability to reflect, adapt, and experiment illustrates a core trajectory of

professional growth grounded in real classroom experiences and they also became more aware of the need to tailor instruction and explore creative, engaging activities.

Challenges of the Rural Classroom Context

The realities of teaching in rural Kalimantan Barat emerged strongly in the participants' narratives. Teachers faced considerable obstacles including students' lack of foundational English skills, economic burdens, and low academic motivation. Several participants expressed frustration and concern regarding their students' academic readiness. As Ani noted in her reflective journal:

“Maintaining the enthusiasm of students who are still having difficulty even in basic English has become a big challenge for me. Most students are not familiar with English because there was no English teacher in their previous school. The students also often look tired and sleepy because most of them go to school while working and coming to school is just a formality for them. In addition, the signal at school also sucks and there is no Wi-Fi that supports it so the teaching and learning process only relies on textbooks.” (Ani, reflective journal)

This lack of foundational skills is quite a familiar experience for teachers in rural areas, as Cecil also shared the same issue. In the interview, she expressed the difficulties in teaching such as classroom setting, lack of facilities and also the students that are not familiar with English.

“Some students are unfamiliar with the alphabet and are unable to count in English. This situation requires a great deal of patience. Even though I currently teach at the senior high school, I often have to recall the middle school material. These things happen because, during their middle school, there was no English teacher or the teacher assigned did not provide proper instruction.” (Cecil, interview)

Beyond academic limitations, teachers also observed that students were often burdened by responsibilities outside of school, including work obligations that drained their energy and focus. These contextual factors required teachers to lower their expectations, extend patience, and find ways to reconnect with students' realities. The situation reflects how rural teaching contexts shaped both the emotional labour and instructional strategies of novice teachers. These experiences pushed them to consider how to make their teaching relevant and accessible within a challenging environment, reinforcing the need for empathetic and context-sensitive pedagogical practices.

Emotional Labor and Resilience

Demands and challenges that teachers experience during their teaching profession tend to shape their behaviour and emotions to face it, these contexts also become another key theme in this research. From the data collected it was found that participants often feel exhausted and burned out both physically and emotionally due to the demands of teaching. But they also demonstrated resilience by taking time to rest and doing hobbies as their coping mechanism to facing these pressures. Ani captures how small acts of self-care were vital to sustaining motivation:

"I often feel exhausted and burnout but I realize I need to maintain that bad energy... I usually go home, enjoy a good meal, take a nap, and spend a good time with my cat and my niece. I try to do whatever helps me recharge. I want to be a good teacher in the future. (Ani, interview)

Aligning with this theme, Cecil admitted she felt tired and stressed while teaching but rather than withdrawing from the pressure, she used her commitment to students as a source of her strength. She realizes that the students need someone to reach their knowledge. This moment was also felt by Budi who shared his struggle and sometimes felt burnout but also had a big sense of responsibility towards his students that made him always find a way to well-being. Erika reflected on the overwhelming feeling she experienced during her first months of teaching, describing how the pressure from high expectations, administrative workload, and student disengagement left her emotionally drained. However, she also noted how finding solidarity with fellow teachers and having open conversations helped her process these emotions and survive.

"I felt like I was being stretched too thin... I didn't know if I was doing anything right but I cope by taking time to rest, discussing with my co-teachers, and remembering my purpose in teaching. That helps me get motivated again." (Erika, interview)

These reflections illustrate that while emotional labour is an unavoidable part of teaching, especially for novices in rural settings, it also fosters a kind of personal and professional resilience. The teachers' ability to endure and adapt not only helped them manage stress but also deepened their sense of purpose. This emotional strength was not isolated from their development but was a critical component that enabled them to remain committed and evolve within the profession. Emotional labour was a significant part of their professional journey. Despite exhaustion, the teachers' commitment to student success helped them find intrinsic motivation and adaptive coping strategies to sustain their teaching.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive look into how critical professional experiences influence the professional development of Gen Z novice EFL teachers in rural Kalimantan Barat. Guided by the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) and analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the study highlights four core areas of development that align with existing educational theories and are reinforced by recent empirical research.

Student Growth as a Catalyst for Teacher Development

Students' growth tends to affect teachers' professionalism in terms of pride and success in teaching. A teacher's personal satisfaction lies in having made an impact on students' lives; seeing their students succeed in life brings them a sense of fulfilment and becomes a reason to remain in the teaching profession (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021; Utami & Kuswandono, 2023; Wijaya & Kuswandono, 2018). Teachers in this study shared their experience by highlighting the idea that student development not only reflects the success of teaching but also serves as a source of meaning, motivation, and professional development for the teachers. For instance, Ani's reflective

journal revealed how a silent student gained confidence over time, which she described as a moment of pride and an emotional reminder of the importance of patience and progress. Similarly, Budi reflected that observing students understand the material brought him a profound sense of satisfaction, stating, "I am so proud when students understand and learn well in my class." Likewise, Dina, Erika, and Cecil emphasized that the most memorable and joyful part of their teaching journey was observing their students develop academically and personally. These experiences provide meaningful reinforcement that helps teachers navigate early career uncertainty and strengthens their professional identity (Kelchtermans, 2009; Klassen & Chiu, 2011). Moments of student success often act as emotional anchors that sustain teachers' motivation, especially during the early, often turbulent, years of their careers (Day & Gu, 2013).

Student growth that particularly defies expectations can be especially impactful for teachers because it also becomes a catalyst that nurtures emotional fulfillment, reinforces the purpose and drives continuous teacher development. (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021; Ikrar & Baa, 2023; Wijaya & Kuswando, 2018). Teachers perceive student success as a validation of their instructional approaches, indicating that their professional identities evolve with each positive student outcome. The finding also aligns with Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which posits that individuals gain confidence in their ability through mastery experiences. When teachers witness their students succeed, especially those who previously struggled, it validates their pedagogical choices and affirms their capability. These experiences reinforce what Alsup (2006) describes as the negotiation between personal and professional identity spaces. "Defining moments" serve as emotional anchors that shape long-term commitment in early-career teachers (Estaji & Fatalaki, 2022; Veach et al., 2002).

Pedagogical Adaptation and Reflective Practice

Teachers were actively navigating their way through classroom realities by rethinking and reshaping their teaching practices (Çukur, 2022; Nazhifah, 2024; Wijaya & Kuswando, 2018). Teachers in this study described how they often reconsidered their teaching method after facing challenges or observing unexpected student responses. Rather than rigidly following the lesson plans, they responded to what was happening in real time and tried to adjust their methods and questioned what worked best for their students. This reflective and adaptive process aligns with Schön (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner," where learning and growth occur through thoughtful engagement. As Farrell (2015) notes, reflective practice is not only about evaluating techniques but about rethinking one's values, beliefs, and understanding of learners.

The teachers in this study showed concern for their students' needs and reflected on how to adjust their teaching methods. Ani recognized her students' interests and needs, so she began to move away from methods that focused solely on textbooks and started using technology to create more enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences. Dina also shared that an emotional experience with one of her students made her rethink her role and change her approach to be more empathetic and supportive. Such experiences are not merely momentary reactions but part of a new habit of continuously reflecting on and adjusting teaching practices. Reflection is not only technical but also demonstrates concern for the teacher-student relationship and creates an inclusive, student-centered learning environment (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021). In this study, reflection often arises from feelings of confusion or discomfort but ultimately leads to positive change. Teachers do not rely solely on external feedback but learn from their own classroom experiences and then try new approaches that are more suitable. Learning from these experiences

helps novice teachers develop their professional identity through self-reflection and practical application (Çukur, 2022; Wijaya & Kuswando, 2018).

Challenges of the Rural Classroom Context

Teaching in rural areas demands a lot and greatly influences how teachers in this study view and carry out their roles. They face various challenges such as academic backwardness, lack of learning facilities, and difficult economic conditions of students. These challenges are the primary factors influencing their actions and focus as teachers (Aminatun & Oktaviani, 2019; Anselma & Mbato, 2023; Lomi & Mbato, 2020). Aligning with these issues Cecil shared her experience encountered in classrooms where many students do not have even the most basic English skills, such as recognizing the alphabet or counting numbers. These findings resonate with prior research on rural EFL education in Indonesia, which highlights how underdeveloped infrastructure, limited access to qualified teachers, and high teacher turnover affect learning continuity and teacher efficacy (Anselma & Mbato, 2023; Lomi & Mbato, 2020). Teachers often found themselves reteaching middle school content at the senior high school level due to years of instructional neglect. As described in Ani's and Cecil's reflections, limited access to English language learning and inconsistent teachers in previous schools forced them to adjust their expectations of students. Teachers in this study tended to slow down instruction and offer more specific emotional and academic support to enhance students' ability in English.

Mulkeen (2006) identified the importance of flexible and context-responsive pedagogy in remote areas. The fact that infrastructure and digital limitations limit teaching options as Ani noted, with no internet access and weak signals, teachers continued to become more creative to deliver lessons even just relying on printed textbooks. The teachers highlighted the importance of paying more attention to students' lived experiences so teachers can adjust their instructional approaches to enhance relevance and responsiveness in classroom settings. In this context, teachers in this study underscore how the rural context shapes not just what is taught, but how teachers teach, think, and grow. Aligning with this context, Nurteteng et al., (2024) define that rural teachers often respond to systemic limitations with innovative, experience-based strategies that strengthen their resilience and professional identity, suggesting that meaningful growth can emerge precisely from navigating contextual constraints. Through these experiences, they developed a deeper sense of patience, empathy, and professional purpose, traits essential for long-term sustainability and impact in rural education.

Emotional Labor and Resilience

Novice EFL teachers in rural Kalimantan Barat experienced significant emotional and physical exhaustion in their early years of teaching. Teachers in this study openly expressed that they felt drained, overwhelmed, and uncertain due to the overwhelming workloads, high expectations, and limited structural support. Ani reflected on how she coped with stress by taking breaks and spending time with loved ones, saying, "*I often feel exhausted and burned out... but I try to do whatever helps me recharge.*" These findings reflect the deeply personal and emotionally charged nature of early professional life in teaching that shaped their resilience and professional identity. Avalos (2011) emphasized that teacher professional development is context-bound and rooted in both emotional and cognitive engagement, meaning that how teachers feel significantly shapes

how they grow professionally. This finding aligns with Day & Gu (2013) model of teacher resilience, which highlights moral purpose, emotional competence, and personal values as pillars for sustaining teacher commitment.

Pedagogical reflection emerged as a key response to the structural and academic challenges in rural classrooms. Teachers were not just delivering lessons; they were constantly adjusting their expectations and methods to fit students' needs. Cecil admitted she had to reteach middle school material in her senior high school class because students lacked foundational knowledge. This finding supports literature on the Critical Incident Technique (Tripp, 1993; Wijaya & Kuswandono, 2018), showing how teachers reflect on and learn from complex real-life situations. Teachers became more attentive to students' backgrounds and more thoughtful in choosing strategies that were relevant and accessible.

Teaching in rural areas, often faced with limited resources and tough conditions, pushed novice teachers to grow in empathy, adaptability, and resilience. Teachers in this research shared how issues about poor infrastructure, unstable internet access, and students' responsibilities at home affected classroom engagement. Ani shared her experience in teaching students who come to school after helping their families work, noting that “for them, coming to school is just a formality”. Teachers in rural areas of Indonesia face a variety of complex challenges (Anselma & Mbato, 2023; Averina & Kuswandono, 2022). However, the teachers in this study remain motivated to teach. They find meaning and purpose in the small experiences they have while teaching. Their reflections indicate that emotional support and space for reflection are crucial for teachers' professional development, particularly for Gen Z teachers working in challenging rural environments.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how critical professional experiences influence the development of Gen Z novice EFL teachers in rural West Kalimantan. Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) within a qualitative framework, four key themes were identified: student growth as a catalyst for teacher development, pedagogical adaptation and reflection, rural classroom challenges, and emotional labour and resilience. The findings show that professional growth is shaped by emotional and context-specific experiences that encourage reflection, adjustment, and identity-building. Teachers shared how student progress strengthened their sense of purpose, while daily challenges pushed them to adapt their teaching and rethink their roles.

This research contributes to discussions on teacher development by emphasizing the role of informal, reflective, and experiential learning, especially in under-resourced rural settings. It offers practical insights for teacher education and policy design to better support Gen Z novice EFL teachers, who value meaningful work and are fluent in digital tools. Although this study has highlighted the value of recognizing novice teachers' lived experiences as key to learning, resilience, and professional identity construction, this study also has limitations. It captures only a single point in time, focuses on one rural area, and does not explore broader institutional or digital support systems. Thus, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach, include comparisons across regions, and examine how institutional support and digital platforms contribute to teacher growth.

The implications of this study suggest that both teachers and schools play a crucial role in developing professional growth and resilience among EFL Gen Z novice teachers. Schools and

teacher education institutions should have structured opportunities for reflection, mentoring, and peer collaboration. It allows novice teachers to learn both from challenges and successes in their early careers. In rural schools, developing communities of practice and providing consistent emotional and professional support can enhance teachers' confidence, agency, and resilience. For teachers, the findings highlight the importance of regularly reflecting on their experiences and adjusting their teaching methods are essential parts of sustained professional development and developing a stronger sense of teacher identity in the classroom.

REFERENCES

- Alsop, J. (2006). *Teacher Identity Discourses: Negotiating Personal and Professional Spaces* (1st Editio). Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617286>
- Aminatun, D., & Oktaviani, L. (2019). Memrise: Promoting Students' Autonomous Learning Skill through Language Learning Application. *Metathesis: Journal of English Language, Literature, and Teaching*, 3(2), 214–223. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31002/metathesis.v3i2.1982>
- Anselma, Y. Y., & Mbato, C. L. (2023). EFL Teachers' Transformation: Burnout and Resilience Experiences in Teachers' Professional Identity Construction Through Critical Incident Techniques. *Language Circle: Journal of Language and Literature*, 18(1), 198–213.
- Avalos, B. (2011). Teacher Professional Development in Teaching and Teacher Education over Ten Years. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(1), 10–20. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.08.007>
- Averina, F. E., & Kuswandono, P. (2022). High School Students' Motivation and Help-Seeking Strategies in English Language Learning. *JELTL (Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics)*, 7(1), 63–81. <https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.21462/jetl.v7i1.719>
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chandran, V. N., Albakri, I. S. M. A., Shukor, S. S., Ismail, N., Tahir, M. H. M., Mokhtar, M. M., & Noraini, Z. (2022). Malaysian English Language Novice Teachers' Challenges and Support during Initial Years of Teaching. *Studies in English Language and Education (SiELE)*, 9(2), 443–461. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v9i2.22974>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Çukur, H. S. (2022). Dealing with Critical Incidents: Experiences of Turkish Novice EFL Teachers. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 25(2), 691–708. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v25i2.4946>
- Dania, T., Chládková, H., Duda, J., Kožíšek, R., & Hrdličková, A. (2023). The Motivation of Generation Z: A Prototype of the Mendel University Student. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 21(3). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2023.100891>

- Day, C., & Gu, Q. (2013). *Resilient Teachers, Resilient Schools: Building and Sustaining Quality in Testing Times* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203578490>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2004). *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. University Rochester Press.
- Estaji, M., & Fatalaki, J. A. (2022). Teacher Educators' Perceptions of Critical Incidents in Teaching Practice: The Case of Novice EFL Teachers. *East European Journal of Psycholinguistics*, 9(1), 30–47. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.29038/eejpl.2022.9.1.est>
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2015). *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Farrell, T. S. C., & Macapinlac, M. (2021). Professional Development Through Reflective Practice: A Framework for TESOL Teachers. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 24(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37213/cjal.2021.28999>
- Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The Critical Incident Technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51(4), 327–358. <https://doi.org/https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0061470>
- Ikrar, I., & Baa, S. (2023). Novice EFL Teachers' Professional Development: A Narrative Inquiry into Micro-Level Development Process. *Klasikal: Journal of Education, Language Teaching and Science*, 5(1), 37–48.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.52208/klasikal.v5i1.613>
- Lomi, A. N.K., & Mbato, C. L. (2020). Struggles and Strategies in Constructing Professional Identity: The First-Year Teaching Experiences of Indonesian EFL Novice Teachers. *Journal of English Education and Teaching (JEET)*, 4(1), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33369/j eet.4.1.1-19>
- Kelchtermans, G. (2009). Career Stories as Gateway to Understanding Teacher Development. In *Teachers' Career Trajectories and Work Lives* (pp. 29–47). Springer Netherlands.
- Klassen, R. M., & Chiu, M. M. (2011). The occupational commitment and intention to quit of practicing and pre-service teachers: Influence of self-efficacy, job stress, and teaching context. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 36(2), 114–129.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2011.01.002>
- Kyriacou, C. (2001). Teacher Stress: Directions for Future Research. *Educational Review*, 53(1), 27–35. <https://doi.org/https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/00131910120033628>
- Lazar, M.-A., Zbucnea, A., & Pinzaru, F. (2023). The Emerging Generation Z Workforce in the Digital World: A Literature Review on Cooperation and Transformation. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence*, 17(1), 1991–2001.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2478/picbe-2023-0175>
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The Measurement of Experienced Burnout. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2(2), 99–113.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030020205>
- Mulkeen, A. (2006). *Teachers for Rural Schools: A Challenge for Africa*.
- Nazhifah, N. (2024). The Professional Development Challenges Faced By The English Novice Teachers In Post-Pandemic. *Eduvest – Journal of Universal Studies*, 4(8), 6712–6727.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v4i8.1728>
- Nurteteng, Sunra, L., & Dollah, S. (2024). Adapting the English Language Teaching Curriculum to Overcome Resource Limitations in Rural Areas. *Jambura Journal of English Teaching and Literature (JETL)*, 5(2), 71–82. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37905/jetl.v5i2.27988>

- Sanam, P. S., Shah, S. W. A., Pathan, D. H., Batool, C., & Raza, M. (2021). An Ethnographic Study of Novice English Language Teachers' Challenges Faced While Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Pakistan. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, 80, 19–23. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7176/jlll/80-04>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Basic Books.
- Septiani, A., Emiliasari, R. N., & Rofi'i, A. (2019). The Novice English Teachers' Experience: Practices and Challenges. *Academic Journal Perspective: Education, Language, and Literature*, 7(2), 109–118.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Sage Publications.
- Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement*. Routledge.
- Utami, A. A., & Kuswando, P. (2023). Exploring EFL Teacher's Agency and Self-Efficacy in Their Professional Practice among Indonesian EFL Teachers. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 289–306. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v7i2.1358>
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing Language Teacher Identity: Three Perspectives and Beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 4(1), 21–44. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0401_2
- Veach, P. M., Bartels, D. M., & LeRoy, B. S. (2002). Defining Moments: Catalysts for Professional Development. *Journal of Genetic Counseling*, 11(4), 277–280. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016330532352>
- Wijaya, A. R. T., & Kuswando, P. (2018). Reflecting Critical Incident as a Form of English Teachers' Professional Development: An Indonesian Narrative Inquiry Research. *IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education)*, 5(2), 101–118. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v5i2.10923>