

**ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
TEACHERS' PHENOMENON OF
PERSEVERANCE IN RURAL SABAH
SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

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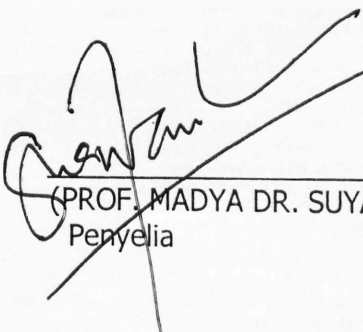

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this dissertation is my own except for quotations, citation, excerpts, summaries and references, which resources have been stated and duly acknowledged.

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Last but not least, to Allah swt, thank you for this precious gift, *alhamdulillah*.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore ESL teachers' phenomenon of perseverance through their lived experiences in ten rural Sabah secondary schools. The central research question was "What are the lived experiences of ESL teachers who persevere in rural Sabah secondary schools?". Sub-questions explored the sources of stress, teachers' sense of self-efficacy and their coping strategies. Methodology utilized a phenomenological case study research design, purposive sampling, data collection primarily through in-depth interviews and observations, and thematic data analysis using Ryan and Bernard's (2000) recommended procedures. The ESL teachers in the study concluded that rural schools do not benefit from conducive environment to support the teaching and learning of English and perceived teaching English in these schools as a stressful task. The facets of rural teaching and learning environment were acknowledged to have significant influences in the formation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy, however, their self-efficacy levels varied based on context-specific basis. Interestingly, the negative descriptions were not considered as sufficient drive for the teachers to depart from rural schools as they have developed a blended concepts of positive emotions as a substantial factor of fuel source to continue serving rural schools. The blended concepts reflecting an emotion-teacher-students relationship was placed at the core of their lived experiences as major force for ESL teachers' perseverance. Moreover, four coping strategies remarked as a psychological support to cope with stress were also contributed to teachers' perseverance and longevity in rural schools. The findings of this study could contribute incrementally to the advancement of knowledge on English education by providing insights into the subject and context-specific descriptions especially in supporting perseverance and longevity of ESL teachers in rural schools.

Keywords: ESL teachers, rural Sabah secondary schools, lived experiences, perseverance, longevity, stress, sense of self-efficacy, coping strategies,

ABSTRAK

FENOMENA KETABAHAN GURU BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA DI SEKOLAH-SEKOLAH MENENGAH LUAR BANDAR SABAH

Tujuan kajian fenomenologikal kes ini ialah untuk menerokai fenomena ketabahan guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua melalui pengalaman hidup mereka yang berkhidmat di sepuluh sekolah menengah luar bandar di Sabah. Soalan utama kajian ialah, "Apakah pengalaman hidup guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris yang tabah berkhidmat di sekolah menengah luar bandar di Sabah?". Sub-soalan menerokai sumber-sumber stress, efikasi sendiri guru dan strategi menangani stress. Metodologi kajian menggunakan rekabentuk kajian fenomenologikal kes, persampelan bertujuan, pengumpulan data utama melalui temubual mendalam dan pemerhatian, dan analisis tematik menggunakan prosedur yang dicadangkan oleh Ryan dan Bernard (2000). Dapatan kajian menunjukkan guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris menyifatkan bahawa sekolah-sekolah menengah luar bandar tidak menikmati manfaat daripada persekitaran yang kondusif untuk pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris dan merasakan pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris di sekolah luar bandar adalah satu tugas yang penuh dengan tekanan. Ciri-ciri persekitaran pengajaran dan pembelajaran juga mempunyai pengaruh yang signifikan dalam pembentukan efikasi sendiri guru, namun, tahap efikasi mereka berbeza-beza berdasarkan konteks-konteks tertentu. Menariknya, deskripsi-deskripsi negatif yang diberikan tidak dianggap sebagai pemacu yang mencukupi untuk guru-guru meninggalkan sekolah luar bandar kerana mereka telah membina satu gabungan konsep emosi positif sebagai faktor pembakar semangat untuk terus berkhidmat di sekolah luar bandar. Gabungan konsep ini mencerminkan hubungan emosi-guru-pelajar diletakkan di teras pengalaman hidup sebagai kekuatan utama ketabahan guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris. Selain itu, empat strategi telah dikenalpasti sebagai sokongan psikologi dalam menangani stress juga menyumbang kepada ketabahan dan keterlangsungan mereka di sekolah luar bandar. Dapatan kajian ini boleh menyumbang kepada pengetahuan literatur dalam pendidikan bahasa Inggeris dengan memberikan pemahaman tentang subjek berkenaan dan deskripsi konteks-spesifik terutamanya dalam menyokong ketabahan dan keterlangsungan guru-guru bahasa Inggeris di sekolah luar bandar.

Kata Kunci: *Guru Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua, sekolah menengah luar bandar, pengalaman hidup guru, ketabahan, keterlangsungan, tekanan, efikasi sendiri, strategi mengatasi*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE	i
DECLARATION	ii
CERTIFICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
<i>ABSTRAK</i>	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xiii
LIST OF APPENDICES	xiv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.0 Overview	1
1.1 Background of the Study	2
1.2 Statement of Problem	7
1.3 Research Aim and Objectives	10
1.4 Research Questions	10
1.5 Conceptual Framework	12
1.6 Nature of Study	15
1.7 Significance of the Study	16
1.8 Scope of Study	17
1.9 Assumptions	18
1.10 Definitions of Key Terms	18
1.11 Organization of the Thesis	21
1.12 Summary	22
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	23
2.0 Introduction	23
2.1 Theoretical Orientation	24
2.1.1 Lazarus and Folkman's Theory of Stress, Appraisal and Coping	25

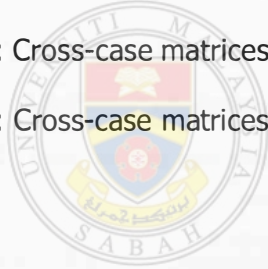
2.1.2	Social Cognitive Theory	28
2.2	Review of Related Literature on ESL Education in Rural Schools	33
2.3	The Burnout Phenomenon among ESL Teachers	38
2.4	Associated Stressors of ESL Teachers' Burnout	41
2.4.1	Context of Work Environment	42
2.4.2	Workload	47
2.4.3	Student factor	49
2.4.4	Lack of Support	53
2.5	The Lived Experiences of ESL Teachers: Rural Schools' Culture, Social, Socio-economic and Environment	56
2.6	Previous Studies	58
2.6.1	Previous Studies on ESL Teachers' Stress and Coping Strategies	59
2.6.2	Previous Studies on ESL Teachers' Sense of Self-efficacy	62
2.7	Understudied Areas	68
2.8	Filling the Gap	70
2.9	Summary	70
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY		72
3.0	Introduction	72
3.1	Research Paradigm	72
3.1.1	Research Design	76
3.2	The Researcher's Role	79
3.3	Research Sites	80
3.4	Sampling	81
3.4.1	Participants	82
3.4.2	Meeting the Participants	84
3.5	Research Methods	93
3.5.1	Semi-structured Interview	93
3.5.2	Observation	97
3.6	Data Collection Procedures	99
3.7	Data Management and Analysis	104
3.7.1	Within-case analysis and Cross-case analysis	108
3.7.2	Thematic Analysis	109
3.8	Trustworthiness	114

3.8.1	Credibility	114
3.8.2	Transferability	116
3.8.3	Dependability	117
3.8.4	Confirmability	117
3.9	Ethical Considerations	117
3.10	Summary	118
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION		119
4.0	Introduction	119
4.1	Entering the phenomenon - Describing ESL teachers' lived experiences in rural Sabah secondary schools	119
4.1.1	Limited English language environment	120
4.1.2	Shortage of teaching resources	125
4.1.3	Poor physical environment	130
4.1.4	Classification of Emerging Themes	134
4.2	Dwelling in the phenomenon - Revealing ESL teacher's stress	135
4.2.1	Dealing with Low English Proficiency (LEP) students	136
4.2.2	Students' Disruptive Behaviour	143
4.2.3	Excessive Workload	146
4.2.4	Lack of Support	152
4.2.5	Classification of Emerging Themes	156
4.3	Reflecting the phenomenon - Understanding ESL teachers' sense of self-efficacy	158
4.3.1	Environmental factor in the formation of ESL teachers' sense of self-efficacy	159
4.3.2	Context-specific self-efficacy beliefs	164
4.3.3	The Fuel Source of Longevity	172
4.3.4	Classification of Emerging Themes	180
4.4	Subsisting in the phenomenon - ESL teachers' coping strategies	182
4.4.1	Stress appraisal	182
4.4.2	Personal Coping Strategies	184
4.4.2	Social Coping Strategies	188
4.4.3	Professional Coping Strategies	191
4.4.4	Institutional Coping Strategies	197

4.4.5	Classification of Emerging Themes	199
4.5	Summary	201
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS		204
5.0	Introduction	204
5.1	Summary of thematic findings	204
5.1.1	Themes	204
5.1.2	Overarching Theme - The Emotion-Teacher-Students Relationship as Major Driving Force For ESL Teachers' Perseverance	209
5.2	Discussion	210
5.2.1	The Lived Experiences of ESL Teachers Who Persevere In Rural Sabah Secondary Schools	210
5.2.2	The Sources of Stress For ESL Teachers In Rural Sabah Secondary Schools	213
5.2.3	The Contribution of ESL Teachers' Lived Experiences In Rural Sabah secondary schools In The Formation of Their Sense of Self-efficacy	218
5.2.4	ESL Teachers' Coping Strategies In Rural Sabah Secondary Schools	223
5.5	Implications of the study	227
5.6	Limitations	229
5.7	Recommendations for future research	230
5.8	Conclusion	232
5.9	Final Reflections	233
REFERENCES		235
APPENDICES		252

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 3.1: Profile of Research Sites	81
Table 3.2: Summary of participants demographic profiles	84
Table 3.3: Interview phases	96
Table 3.4: Data collection sources and frequency	103
Table 3.5: Data Management	106
Table 3.6: Thematic analysis table	112
Table 4.1: Cross-case matrices of descriptions of rural teaching and learning environment	135
Table 4.2: Cross-case matrices of ESL teachers' stress	157
Table 4.3: Cross-case matrices of ESL teachers' sense of self-efficacy	181
Table 4.4: Cross-case matrices of ESL teachers' coping strategies	200



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LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: English Language Results in SPM examination	4
Figure 1.2: English Language Subject Average Grade in SPM 2017	4
Figure 1.3: Conceptual framework	13
Figure 2.1: Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping	25
Figure 2.2: Conceptual Model of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism	32
Figure 3.1: Data collection procedures	100
Figure 3.2: Data Analysis Flow Model	107
Figure 3.3: Research flow	113
Figure 4.1: Graphic representation of the findings of the study	202
Figure 5.1: Thematic analysis of ESL teachers' lived experiences in rural Sabah secondary schools	276
Figure 5.2: Thematic analysis of ESL teachers' stress	277
Figure 5.3: Thematic analysis of ESL teachers' sense of self-efficacy	278
Figure 5.4: Thematic analysis of ESL teachers' coping strategies	279

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	- English as a second language
SPM	- Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
TESL	- Teaching English as a second language
TESOL	- Teaching English to speakers of other languages
MOE	- Ministry of Education
NUTP	- National Union of the Teaching Profession
SCT	- Social Cognitive Theory
ICT	- Information and Communication technology
LCD	- Liquid Crystal Display
LEP	- Low English proficiency
T1	- Teacher 1
T2	- Teacher 2
T3	- Teacher 3
T4	- Teacher 4
T5	- Teacher 5
T6	- Teacher 6
T7	- Teacher 7
T8	- Teacher 8
T9	- Teacher 9
T10	- Teacher 10
SS1	- Secondary school 1
SS2	- Secondary school 2
SS3	- Secondary school 3
SS4	- Secondary school 4
SS5	- Secondary school 5
SS6	- Secondary school 6
SS7	- Secondary school 7
SS8	- Secondary school 8
SS9	- Secondary school 9
SS10	- Secondary school 10



UMS
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LIST OF APPENDICES

	Page
APPENDIX A: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS	252
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM	253
APPENDIX C: LETTER OF CONSENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH	254
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	255
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	256
APPENDIX F: SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT	257
APPENDIX G: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL	267
APPENDIX H: SAMPLE OF OBSERVATION DATA	268
APPENDIX I: CODING SAMPLES - ATLAS.TI	270
APPENDIX J: SAMPLE ANALYSIS (Atlas.ti)	271
APPENDIX K: WITHIN CASE ANALYSIS (matrix)	272
APPENDIX L: THEMATIC ANALYSIS	276
APPENDIX M: SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS	280
APPENDIX N: LETTER FOR PEER REVIEW FOR DATA VERIFICATION	283
APPENDIX O: JOURNAL ARTICLE	284
APPENDIX P: CONFERENCES	285
APPENDIX Q: ACCEPTANCE LETTER FOR CONFERENCE	286

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

Many teachers and students in Malaysian rural areas struggle with the seemingly insuperable difficulties associated with their underperforming rural schools in English subject (Cheng, Melor, & Maslawati, 2016; Ee, 2012; Hazita, 2009; Marwan, Sumintono, & Mislán, 2012). The existing literature have provided alarming evidence of the disparity between urban and rural schools which are seriously pressing students' achievement, and this situation is most serious in poorer states such as Sabah, Kelantan and Malacca (World Bank, 2010). Furthermore, the report in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013) noted that due to larger proportion of rural schools, Sabah is recorded as the lowest-performing state in all public examinations. In the context of rural Sabah, the multilingualism rural communities (Hazita, 2009), as well as heterogeneous and culturally diverse ethnic groups interestingly coloured the uniqueness of English language learning (Hariharan, Arsaythamby & Ho, 2013). Above and beyond this situation, the low level of students' achievement in underperforming rural schools eventually contributes to the ongoing de-vitalization of entire communities who are already living with socio-economic disadvantage (Cheng, Melor, & Maslawati, 2016).

In recent years many researchers in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) in the country have become increasingly interested in exploring the factors contributed to this issue. Many studies have focused on the relationship between teacher factors and rural students' performance in the subject such as the phenomenon of English as a second language (ESL) teachers burnout (Mahboobeh, Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2012; Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, 2014; Mukundan & Khandehroo 2010; Mukundan *et al.*, 2015), high teacher turnover (World Bank, 2010) and shortage of teachers (Marwan, Sumintono & Mislán, 2012; Nur, 2016; World Bank, 2010). These factors are common and strongly associated with low students' achievement in rural schools (Wreikat, Kabilan, & Abdullah, 2014). Nevertheless, each of these previous studies has researched only a part of

this complex teacher factor and students' performance relationship. None of these studies has explored the lived experiences of teachers who have shown perseverance in serving rural Sabah secondary schools, particularly looking into the stress faced, sense of self-efficacy and coping strategies that provided meanings into their longevity in these schools. While many studies have delved into this disconcerting issue, the present study zeroes in on the lived experiences of a particular group of ESL teachers serving in rural Sabah secondary schools who persevere in their field despite obstacles.

1.1 Background of the Study

In today's global world, the importance of English cannot be denied and ignored since English is the most common language spoken everywhere. With the help of developing technology, English has been playing a major role in many sectors including medicine, engineering, and education. For Malaysians to be able to compete in this era of globalisation and internalization, the acquisition of this worldwide spoken language has become a crucial necessity. Good command of the language will provide better career opportunities as well as strengthening the country's international power. Realizing the importance of the English language, Malaysia has given a high priority to its educational development since the independence gained in 1957. Historically, the emphasis of English language education has begun in the pre-independence era as a salient characteristic of English colonization to establish secular education in Malaya (Hazita, 2006). Interestingly, the language did not lose its standing in the post-independence era. The National Language and National Educational Policies were implemented gradually from 1970 to 1983 in primary and secondary schools. The implementation of these policies witnessed that English language was no longer used as the medium of instruction for all subjects since 1971, except for the subject itself, at all government schools. In the Third Malaysia plan, Malay language is given the status of national language and English is taught as a second language in schools. Ever since, the emphasis on English education was then placed as a compulsory subject to be taught in the curriculum.

Nevertheless, ESL education remains a prominent issue in the country as the general situation in the country shows that the achievement of urban students

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is better compared to those who are studying in rural schools in the subject and this is yet to be addressed significantly (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In ESL education, Ghani and Gill (2003) stated that studies on rural education indicated a broad difference between rural and urban students' achievement. The disparity between urban and rural schools performance influences the overall English language achievement at national level. The concern over rural students' low achievement in the subject has been discussed quite extensively in the literature (Hazita, 2006; Osman Rani & Rajah, 2011; Ee, 2012; Wreikat, Kabilan & Abdullah, 2014; Nur, 2016). This urban-rural disparity may derail Malaysia's trajectory to achieve National Transformation 2050 vision (TN50) as the shortcomings of rural schools hinder the educational mission.

Subsequently, in 2013, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has come out with an endeavour to reduce the gap between urban and rural schools achievement through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013) to ensure equity in education. In consideration of this endeavour, it is reported that there are significant variations in outcomes in the country across states where Sabah is recorded as the lowest performing state in all public examinations due to higher proportion of rural schools in Sabah compared to other states in the country (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). In the context of secondary school, 70.89% from the total number of secondary schools in the state are categorized as rural secondary schools (Sabah Education Department, 2016). This is verified by students' achievement level in English language subject in *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) examination for the 2013 to 2017 as shown in Figure 1.1, and the differences between rural and urban Sabahan students' achievement in SPM examination 2017 as shown in Figure 1.2.

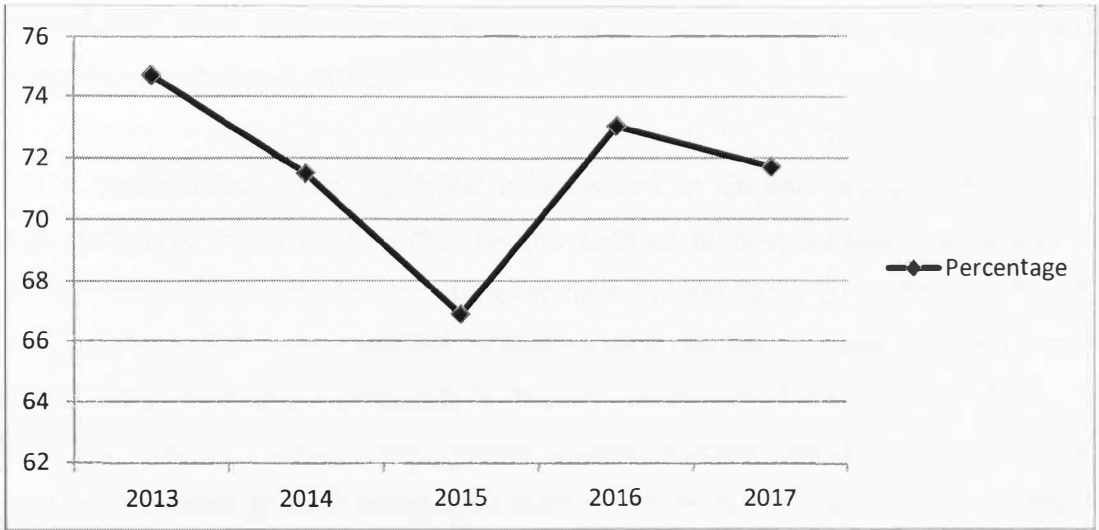


Figure 1.1 : English Language Results in SPM examination 2013-2017(Sabah, Malaysia)

Source : Sabah Education Department (2018)

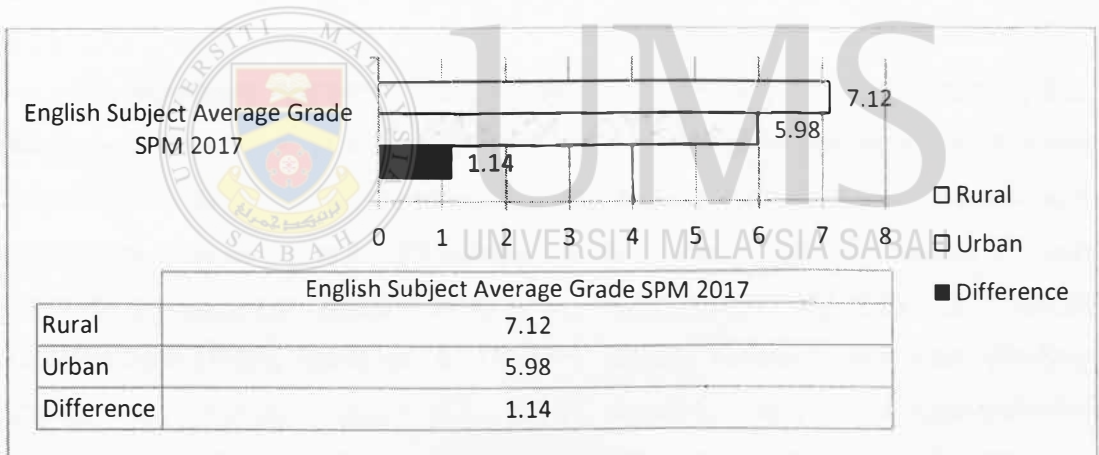


Figure 1.2 : English Language Subject Average Grade in SPM 2017

Source : Sabah Education Department (2018)

Many studies have highlighted that this poor performance was a consequence from the fact that most rural students experience contact with the language only during their English language classes in schools (Normazidah, Koo, & Hazita, 2012). This indicates that rural students depend almost solely on their teachers (Lim, Melor, & Mohamed Amin, 2017). In addition, rural students are also found to be passive learners (Lim, Melor, & Mohamed Amin, 2017) and often consider English as a

subject that is too difficult that they give up trying to accomplish the tasks given (Rose Dayang & Melor, 2016).

Nevertheless, rural students' achievement in English language subject is also commonly linked with teacher factors such as teacher burnout (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010), high teacher turnover rates (World Bank, 2010; Ramesh-Rao & Rohana, 2011; Nur 2016) and lack of high-quality teachers in rural schools (World Bank, 2010; Marwan, Sumintono, & Mislán, 2012; Nur 2016; Cheng, Melor, & Maslawati, 2016). Findings from several studies depicted that the stress from the work environment in rural schools led teachers to be burned out, thus lower their motivation which consequently render the English teaching and learning process to be ineffective (Cheng, Melor, & Maslawati, 2016). Moreover, Ramesh-Rao and Rohana (2011) noted that teachers are commonly more interested to serve in high socio-economic status schools in urban areas and this situation results higher turnover rate among teachers at rural schools.

A significant number of commonalities contributing to burnout among ESL teachers in Malaysian rural schools have been identified in the literature. Multiple stressors contributing to ESL teachers burnout include context of work environment where the teachers teach (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010), limited English language environment (Abdul Rashid *et al.*, 2006; Ming *et al.*, 2010), poor school infrastructure (Mitra, Dangwal & Thadani, 2008), teachers' workload (Roslan, Sharifah & Thirumalai, 2012; Nur, 2016), students' behavioural issues (Mohd Hasani & Zainuddin, 2012), insufficient availability of teaching resources (Wreikat, Kabilan & Abdullah, 2014) and lack of support (Holloway, 2002). It is noted that these effects are predominantly strong in low performing rural schools (Nur, 2016).

The pathway from constituted multi-source stress to teacher factor to low student achievement leads to a negative impact on rural communities. In particular, this pathway has a seriously detrimental impact on rural schools in which challenges are intensified by the disadvantages of the teaching and learning environment as well as lack of adequate resources and support to assist teachers in teaching English (Ming, 2010). The 'in-situ' environment, referring to the existing teaching and learning environment of rural schools, seems to have a great

influence in the psychology of the teachers. According to Mukundan and Khandehroo, 2010, one of the identified sources of burnout is the context of work environment where ESL teachers teach. This is supported by a report entitled "Misery in rural Sabah schools" by FMT news dated February 4th, 2014 which noted that the Director of Sabah Education Department emotionally called for aid regarding the poor condition of rural schools in the state in which it has reduced state education performance. As William and Burden (1997, p.188) pointed out, *"an understanding of the ways in which aspects of environment affect learning is particularly important for language teachers and learners"*. Thus, it is crucial to note that the teaching and learning environment does not only affect students' performance, but there is also significant complex relationship between the environment and the behaviour and practice of teachers (Martin, 2002; Hannah, 2013).

Moreover, Nur (2016) revealed that teachers in rural schools have to bear more responsibilities and portfolios due to the shortage of teaching staff where teachers are forced to carry teaching loads in multiple subjects. This is aligned with a report in The Daily Express dated September 26, 2016, where the President of the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) revealed that many graduate teachers left teaching profession after about two years due to stress from overloaded workload, mostly among those who were sent to rural schools. In the same report, The Director-General of Ministry of Education stated that the Ministry is aware of the stress, pressure, predicament and woes faced by rural teachers who are heavily burdened by excessive workload, and actions are being taken to reduce at least 50% of the workload in which rural teachers will benefit, however, it may take some time for the implementation. This report concurred with the facts reported by World Bank (2010) about the situation in Malaysian rural schools where there is high teacher turnover rate as well as shortage of ESL teachers.

As English language is considered as one of the critical subjects in rural Sabah secondary schools due to the low achievement in SPM examination, to many, one way to ensure improvement on students' performance is through improving the quality of the teaching itself. There is a vast number of studies in the literature that have proposed guidelines, keys, models, frameworks for successful

language teaching (Williams & Burden, 1997) as well as the discussion of quality and quantity of second language input, the nature of language learning tasks, application of teaching methodology and learner traits and strategies (Dörnyei, 2007). While such findings potentially describe the overall scholarly debate on effective English language teaching, they reveal far too little about the role of teachers' lived experiences and its relation to non-cognitive variables such as stress, sense of self-efficacy and coping strategies which have repeatedly been associated with teacher longevity in rural schools.

Even though schools are generally meant for students, it is undeniable that students are influenced by teachers who are actually affected by their workplace and its circumstances (Goodlad, 2004). Teachers should not be 'lost' but rather be able to identify the stressors, cope with them, and enjoy teaching more confidently and enthusiastically throughout their profession. For this purpose, research is needed to seek for better understanding of ESL education in rural Sabah secondary schools through the teachers' perspective. Therefore, instead of relying on studies addressing on findings on students' perspectives, the intention of this study was to explore and describe ESL teachers' lived experiences who persevere in rural Sabah secondary schools which may offer insights for more conclusive findings.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The main concern that led to this study is referred to the phenomenon of ESL teachers' burnout where findings from several studies have shown that the level of burnout among these teachers is significantly high (Mahboobeh, Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2012; Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, Mukundan & Khandehroo 2010; 2014; Mukundan *et al.*, 2015). Although ESL teachers in rural Sabah secondary schools wish to positively impact and serve their communities, the problem is they experience a high level of stressors that present a challenge to their teaching ability. The World Bank (2010) presented a comprehensive review to illustrate the stressors faced by teachers in Malaysian rural schools:

A lack of resources is one reason for their relatively poor performance, but other factors also come into play. For example, there is a high turnover of teachers in these schools as well as a shortage of teachers in English,

mathematics, and science. Due to the small size of these schools, many teachers in rural schools are expected to cover several grades at the same time (multi-grade teaching), which means that they are unable to impart each grade's curricula separately. Also, the infrastructure of these schools is often inadequate. Some schools do not have electricity for 24 hours a day or an adequate source of water (p.92).

While the stressors to be dealt with are considerable for teachers in general, they are particularly intense for those serving in rural schools (Nur, 2016) as many teachers preferred to teach in urban schools (Ramesh-Rao & Rohana, 2011). Consequently, rural schools are facing issues in retaining quality teachers due to high turnover rates (World Bank, 2010; Marwan, Sumintono & Mislana, 2012; Nur, 2016). The situation of high teacher turnover in rural schools has a negative impact fiscally on educational settings. The consistent fluctuation of teachers coming and going out from rural schools has negatively impacted students' achievement in public examinations. Moreover, lack of teachers' quality such as low motivation among teachers in rural schools is also identified as a factor to render the teaching and learning process of English to be ineffective (Cheng, Melor, & Maslawati, 2016). Thus, it comes as no surprise that students' achievement diminishes when teachers who are suffering from stress and burned out stay in the classroom (Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, 2014). In general, the challenge of how to make ESL teachers stay for a long period in rural schools where they are sent to serve is the crucial concern in the country's educational settings.

Findings from various studies have linked burnout among ESL teachers with low-performing schools in public examinations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013), and high percentage of low socio economic status students (Ramesh-Rao & Rohana, 2011; Cheng, Melor, & Maslawati, 2016). Due to the large proportion of rural areas in Sabah state, many secondary schools fit the criteria as they are serving low socio-economic communities in rural areas and are categorized as low performing schools in English language subject (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Given consideration to these facts, the question arises as what is really happening in the phenomenon of English language teaching in rural Sabah secondary schools. Although it is often assumed that the urban students perform