Reseach paper

Omid Kalantar[1]
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3256-7244

Tatiana Gavilanes[2]
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0815-5789

Gisella Robles[3]
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2259-8362

[1] Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE), Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE), English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL);
Orcid: 0009-0004-3256-7244;
omid.sahranavard@unae.edu.ec

[2] Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE), Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE), English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL);
Orcid: 0009-0006-0815-5789;
tygavilanes@unae.edu.ec

[3] Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE), Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE), English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL);
Orcid: 0009-0004-2259-8362;
garobles@unae.edu.ec

*** Corresponding author:**
Omid Kalantar, Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE), Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE), English Language Teaching and Learning (ELTL), Sector Chuquipata,
Av. Independencia S/N, Azogues, Ecuador;
Orcid: 0009-0004-3256-7244;
omid.sahranavard@unae.edu.ec

To cite this article:
Kalantar, O., Gavilanes, T., & Robles, G. (2026). Teaching English in multigrade schools: From teacher education to classroom realities. *Papeles, 18*(35), e2388.
https://doi.org/10.54104/papeles.v18n35.2388

Teaching English in Multigrade Schools: From Teacher Education to Classroom Realities

La enseñanza del inglés en escuelas multigrado: desde la formación docente hasta las realidades del aula

https://doi.org/10.54104/papeles. v18n35.2388

Received: January 21st, 2026
Approved: April 21st, 2026
Published: September 5th, 2026



Abstract

Introduction: This study examined multigrade education policies, pre-service English teacher education practices, and the classroom realities of novice teachers when teaching English in multigrade schools in rural Ecuador. **Methodology:** Using a case study design, data were collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews with two preservice English teachers who taught in two multigrade schools as part of their practicum. The document analysis phase provided insight into teacher education practices and the policies for multigrade education, while the interviews revealed classroom realities and how new teachers are prepared to encounter those realities. **Results and discussion:** The results of this study indicate that the policies introduced for multigrade education provide suitable recommendations; however, multigrade schools are located in rural areas, but teacher education in Ecuador focuses on training teachers for urban settings. This leads newly qualified teachers to resort to improvisation when working in a multigrade context. Moreover, multigrade education in Ecuador is characterized by a lack of English teachers, limited educational resources, inadequate infrastructure, limited technology use, and a lack of a structured English curriculum. **Conclusions:** To address these challenges, practical recommendations are provided. Moreover, it is recommended to use short but targeted inservice and pre-service multigrade teacher training programs that train rural residents to serve as teachers in their communities.

Keywords:
Multigrade education; ELT;EFL; teacher education; education

Resumen

Introducción: Este estudio examinó las políticas de educación multigrado, las prácticas de formación de docentes de inglés en formación inicial y las realidades del aula que enfrentan los docentes novatos al enseñar inglés en escuelas multigrado en zonas rurales de Ecuador. **Metodología:** Utilizando un diseño de estudio de caso, los datos se recopilaron mediante análisis documental y entrevistas en profundidad con dos docentes de inglés en formación que enseñaron en dos escuelas multigrado como parte de su práctica profesional. La fase de análisis documental proporcionó información sobre las prácticas de formación docente y las políticas de educación multigrado, mientras que las entrevistas revelaron las realidades del aula y cómo se prepara a los nuevos docentes para enfrentarlas. **Resultados y discusión:** Los resultados de este estudio indican que las políticas implementadas para la educación multigrado ofrecen recomendaciones adecuadas; sin embargo, las escuelas multigrado se encuentran en zonas rurales, mientras que la formación docente en Ecuador se centra en preparar a los profesores para contextos urbanos. Esto lleva a que los docentes recién titulados recurran a la improvisación cuando trabajan en contextos multigrado. Además, la educación multigrado en Ecuador se

Palabras Clave:
Educación multigrado; enseñanza del inglés; inglés como lengua extranjera; formación docente; educación

caracteriza por la falta de docentes de inglés, recursos educativos limitados, infraestructura inadecuada, uso limitado de la tecnología y la ausencia de un currículo estructurado de inglés. **Conclusiones:** Para abordar estos desafíos, se proponen recomendaciones prácticas. Asimismo, se recomienda implementar programas de formación docente multigrado, tanto en servicio como en formación inicial, que sean breves pero específicos, y que capaciten a residentes de zonas rurales para desempeñarse como docentes en sus propias comunidades.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Ecuador has seen unprecedented progress in providing access to education to all citizens by recognizing and constitutionally backing this inherent right from preschool to the undergraduate level in higher education (Echavarría & Orosz, 2021). To achieve this, the Ecuadorian government has invested heavily in teacher training universities and introduced initiatives to construct new educational infrastructure and renovate the existing ones to improve public education. One such initiative is called "The Millennium Schools Project", which has built new public schools and renovated the old ones, mainly in zones where the educational infrastructure has been characterized as "low quality" (Espinoza, 2018). The objective of such investments is achieving societal transformation through free and equitable education for all participants, especially in vulnerable areas, which has been largely successful in terms of improving literacy rates in Ecuador (Echavarría & Orosz, 2021).

However, providing access to education in Ecuador is still a challenge, especially in remote rural communities. Therefore, multigrade schooling has been introduced to address these challenges as well as teacher shortages and inadequate infrastructure (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2021). In these settings, both communities and education authorities must adapt to realities and teach multiple grades within the same classroom (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2021). The Ministry of Education has also altered the national curriculum for teaching English to allow for context-sensitive teaching strategies that reflect the unique cultural, linguistic, and geographic realities of rural Ecuador (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016).

Given the importance of the initiatives mentioned above, it is salient to conduct follow-up studies and investigate whether or not such initiatives have been able to address the problems. However, multigrade education has been the subject of very limited research. Moreover, the literature on teacher education, classroom realities, and the challenges associated with teaching English in multigrade contexts in Ecuador is scarce. In this sense, teacher education is a relevant topic to explore since teachers who are trained for urban schools may not be adequately prepared to tackle classroom realities in rural multigrade schools. The lived realities of teachers employed in such contexts are also salient since they reveal potential areas of improvement. On a different note, the literature on teaching English in multigrade contexts in Ecuador does not include any study related to the real-life experiences of pre-service teachers who practice in multigrade schools. Therefore, the real-life practice of teaching and its associated challenges as perceived by the practitioners in the field have been left unidentified. Hence, this study sought to explore pre-service English teachers' experiences in multigrade settings from their teacher education program to teaching in the field.

1.1 Multigrade Education

Multigrade classrooms are a response to educational challenges in rural areas where geographical access and the number of students are limited (Aksoy, 2008; Berry & Little, 2006). This educational model has long existed in both developing and developed countries, especially in the United States and Canada, since it provides an opportunity to level students and prevent delays in education (Little, 2001). In a multigrade classroom, teachers are assigned several levels in a single classroom; therefore, they play an important role in the process of teaching and learning (Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016). For instance, a multigrade elementary school classroom may consist of students from second grade to fourth grade learning at the same time and being taught by the same teacher in the same classroom. Multigrade teaching is often regarded as a strategic educational model that supports inclusive education goals (Buaraphan et al, 2018; Thephavongsa, 2018). It has enabled children in remote areas to access education.

Given that this study targets the Latin American context, we focused our literature review on this region. In Latin America, multigrade schooling is widely practiced in countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador (Hargreaves et al., 2001) in response to rural conditions, such as geographic dispersion, low population density, and socioeconomic inequality (Little, 2006; McEwan, 2008). Among the various multigrade initiatives implemented in the region, Colombia's *Escuela Nueva* has received the greatest scholarly attention (Psacharopoulos et al., 1993). This model recommends student-centered pedagogy, self-paced learning guides, peer tutoring, and strong community involvement. Empirical evaluations of this model demonstrate modest but consistent improvements in student achievement compared to traditional rural schools (McEwan, 1998; 2008).

Research from other parts of Latin America indicates that multigrade classrooms face challenges, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and curricula designed for urban schools (Little, 2006). For instance, a recent systematic review of 93 peer-reviewed studies published across 59 international journals highlights that multigrade education in Latin America remains weakly supported by national education systems, despite its prevalence (Chiappe et al., 2025). The same pattern is observed in Ecuador, where we conducted this study. In the Ecuadorian context, despite the scarcity of research studies on multigrade education, the available literature indicates that a large number of rural schools are multigrade (Herrera et al., 2024). However, most teachers receive insufficient preparation for multigrade instruction, leading them to rely on improvisation or traditional methods (Herrera et al., 2024). This is a significant shortcoming since educational success highly depends on teacher training, contextualized materials, and supportive policy frameworks, which remain unevenly developed across Latin America (UNESCO, 2015). Finally, case studies in indigenous multigrade contexts emphasize the need for community participation and culture-sensitive education (Pumashunta Ortega, 2025).

In Latin America, multigrade schooling is widely practiced in countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador, in response to rural conditions, such as geographic dispersion, low population density, and socioeconomic inequality.

1.2 Multigrade Classroom Realities and Teacher Education

Little (2006) argues that although many of the competencies required for multigrade teaching overlap with general teacher training, such as pedagogical knowledge, it also requires special forms of preparation that are rarely addressed in general teacher training programs. These include multilevel curriculum integration, differentiated instruction, classroom organization, and time management. As a result, many teachers enter multigrade classrooms feeling unprepared for teaching multiple grade levels (Magno, 2014; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Although mentors prepare future educators for classroom realities, the training typically does not address the unique complexities of multigrade teaching (Quinco-Cadosales, 2017). In practice, however, and as reflected in the focus of our study, the effectiveness of instruction in multigrade settings depends heavily on the teacher's ability to adapt and deliver lessons successfully (Quinco-Cadosales, 2011).

In-service multigrade teachers also face difficult conditions. These conditions include limited parental involvement in their children's education, insufficient government funding, and limited teaching resources (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In other countries, such as those in Türkiye and the Netherlands, multigrade teachers face a wide range of difficulties, including inadequate transportation, low parental literacy, poor socioeconomic conditions, high teacher workload, time constraints, language barriers, and instructional challenges during classroom implementation (Aksoy, 2008; Engin, 2018). Although these difficulties vary across different contexts and countries, they point to common challenges that may be observed elsewhere in the world. For example, in Türkiye, multigrade teachers report difficulties in teaching English due to their own lack of proficiency in the language skills (Doğan et al., 2020). These challenges contribute to lower academic performance among students in multigrade settings (Checchi & De Pala, 2018). This leads teachers to devote their teaching time to classroom management and content coverage and neglect higher-order skills (Chiappe et al., 2025).

Many teachers enter multigrade classrooms feeling unprepared for teaching multiple grade levels.

In Ecuador, the literature regarding teacher education for multigrade education reveals that teachers are not trained to become multigrade schoolteachers, as training programs are oriented toward teaching in urban schools, which serve more than 90% of the student population (PortillaFaicán et al., 2025; Salazar-Gómez & Tobón, 2018; Zambrano-Trujillo et al, 2022). Regarding classroom realities, studies show that rural multigrade schools typically lack the infrastructure required to support the integration of technology (Cárdenas et al., 2024). Because of this, teachers must opt for traditional and conventional methods that do not encourage students' motivation to learn and understand in a better way with the use of technology. Kormos and Wisdom (2021) argue that the use of technology in these contexts is limited due to budget and internet access issues. Saant et al. (2023) highlight that the lack of high-quality educational resources is a major challenge in rural schools in Ecuador.

To address such challenges, there is a growing body of research that suggests strategies to employ in such contexts (Ballesteros & Ocampo, 2016; Buaraphan et al., 2018;



Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Little, 2004; Msimanga, 2020; Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017; Quail & Smyth, 2014; Sampson, 2016; Thephavongsa, 2018; Tiernan et al., 2018). Ballesteros and Ocampo (2016) suggest the use of "To Do" lists, peer-assisted learning, and the physical partitioning of classrooms to manage simultaneous instruction. They also highlight that creating curricula that address local needs and sharing teaching materials can be beneficial and address the problem of limited resources. Thephavongsa (2018) emphasizes the importance of professional development and recommends the use of lesson study and annual teacher training programs. Quail and Smyth (2014) state that teachers must design their own materials to respond to their own classroom realities. From the studies mentioned above, it is clear now that context-sensitive materials are needed to tackle context-sensitive realities.

Another relevant recommendation is that of Mortazavizadeh et al. (2017), who advocate for differentiated strategies based on regional prosperity levels, suggesting the use of natural, community-based, and recycled materials in underfunded areas and integrating new technologies where feasible. They also propose consolidating students from nearby rural schools to enhance collaborative learning opportunities and reduce teacher workload. Sampson (2016) illustrates how teachers can use differentiated instruction by combining whole-group teaching with peer tutoring, using kinesthetic methods for early literacy development, and teaching content based on learners' needs. Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015) advocate for embracing student heterogeneity by assigning leadership roles to more advanced learners who can assist their peers, thereby promoting peer support and collaborative learning. In Ecuador, Zambrano et al. (2022) highlight differentiated instruction as a necessity in multilevel contexts, stating that it provides opportunities for teachers to pursue particular goals for students in every grade level, thus supporting diversity and inclusiveness. Carrete-Marín and Domingo-Peñafiel (2022) recommend that educators turn to non-digital resources, such as printed materials and radio programs, to engage students in contexts with limited technological infrastructure.

Despite the insights gained by the reviewed literature, it is clear that the experiences of pre-service teachers regarding training and the challenges associated with teaching in multigrade schools have been unexplored. Moreover, general research output on multigrade education is uneven and scarce (Chiappe et al., 2025). These issues warrant investigating the challenges and potential supporting strategies to be used by newly trained teachers to gain more insight into the matter and provide real strategies. In light of the aforementioned gaps, this study aimed to provide an answer to the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** To what extent are pre-service English teachers trained to teach English in multigrade classes?
>
> **RQ2:** What classroom realities do pre-service English teachers face when teaching English in multigrade settings?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants and Context

The participants in this study were two of the three co-authors of this study, who presented their lived experiences of teaching in multigrade schools. The participants were both 24-year-old preservice English teachers enrolled in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) major at a public university in Ecuador. This university was selected based on its relevance, since it was a teacher training university, and its availability. Both participants were enrolled in the eighth semester and were among the highest-achieving pre-service teachers selected by the university to carry out their practicum in multigrade rural areas. As part of their practicum, the participants were responsible for teaching at two public multigrade schools located in rural regions of Ecuador. In the first school, approximately 28 students were taught by two teachers, one teacher specializing in primary education and the other in secondary education. The students were grouped into two main classrooms: one comprising students from first to fourth grade, and another comprising students from fifth to seventh grade. The second school, located in a different rural area, also had 28 students taught by two teachers in two classrooms. The first classroom included 18 students from the preparatory to the fourth grade, and the second classroom was composed of 10 students in secondary education. Each one of the participants of this study worked at a different school and was solely responsible for planning and delivering instruction to students across multiple grades within the same classroom. They were responsible for teaching various school subjects, including English.



2.2 Method and Data Collection

This study followed a qualitative approach. Since the aim of this study was to identify the lived experiences of two teachers teaching at a multigrade institution in Ecuador, the researchers employed a case study design. As described by Creswell and Creswell (2017), case studies are useful inquiries, especially designed to gain insight into and conduct in-depth analysis of a case or process, in which one or more individuals are involved. In this respect, the case in this study was bound to the context of multigrade schools and the specific case of two pre-service English teachers experiencing multigrade teaching for the first time.

Data for this study were gathered in two stages. The first stage involved the critical analysis of official documents to identify teacher training practices and pedagogical guidelines associated with multigrade education. The documents analyzed were the curriculum of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language program of a teacher training university in Ecuador (Universidad Nacional de Educación, 2023), the official curriculum for teaching English at Ecuadorian schools (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016), and the official guidelines for teaching multigrade schools in Ecuador (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2021).

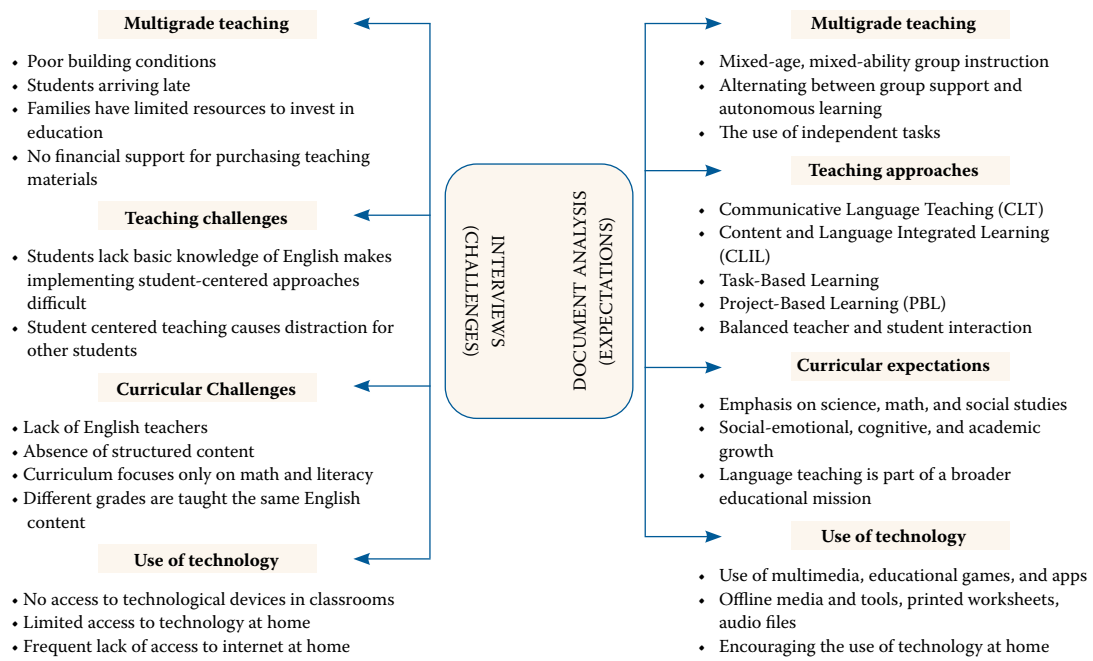
The national English curriculum for Ecuadorian schools was analyzed to understand the general policies and expectations for teaching English in Ecuador, and the Multigrade Guidelines were analyzed to understand multigrade policies. The documents were analyzed using a criteria-based approach (See Appendix A) that focused on teacher training courses,

multigrade education, and policies of teaching English in rural and multigrade settings. The second stage involved gauging participants' training, perceptions, and experiences related to teaching multigrade classes through semi-structured interviews conducted online on Zoom (See Appendix B). Given that the participants in the interviews were also co-authors in this study, careful bracketing was exercised to ensure data collection and analysis were unbiased. Specifically, structural bracketing was used by the corresponding author to consciously distance himself from the participants' insider position, ensuring no prior relationships or shared experiences affected the analysis. In doing so, all the interviews were conducted and analyzed exclusively by the corresponding author. The co-authors whose experiences were used as data were not involved in the design, conduct, or analysis of the interviews, ensuring that their reflections and experiences were documented independently and without influence on the research process.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive coding. In the document analysis phase, a document analysis guide was developed to identify teaching practices, teacher training goals, and policy expectations in multigrade education. The documents were read multiple times, and the findings were noted descriptively. In the second stage, the interview data were coded and analyzed inductively. As evident in Figure 1, descriptive coding was used to identify patterns in the lived experiences of the participants teaching multigrade classes and areas of difference between policy and practice. To ensure code validity, the researchers used code-data alignment. A codebook was developed, and the corresponding author compared the codes with the text multiple times to ensure code validity.

Figure 1. Codes map



Source: Provided by the authors

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Document Analysis

The document analysis phase was initiated by analyzing the curriculum of the Teaching as a Foreign Language (TEFL) major of a teacher training university in Ecuador, where the participants of this case study were enrolled. The analysis revealed that although the curriculum included various teacher training subjects, none of the subjects addressed multigrade education. It heavily focused on improving pre-service teachers' general English skills, teaching skills, and research competencies. The only course that could relate to multigrade teaching was a subject called "differentiated instruction." This subject addressed teaching students with diverse needs and learning styles, including special needs, but its goals and objectives were designed for urban schools, rather than multigrade schools. The analysis of the English as a Foreign Language Curriculum (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016) revealed that teaching in Ecuador is expected to involve a learner-centered, communicative approach. To this end, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Learning and Teaching (TBLT), which emphasize meaningful interaction and real-world use of language, are highly recommended. This document also promotes the development of cognitive skills and higher-order thinking in students using authentic contexts. Additionally, the use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) to integrate language instruction with meaningful content and real-life experiences is recommended, and projects are expected to be collaborative, relevant, and interdisciplinary.

It heavily focused on improving pre-service teachers' general English skills, teaching skills, and research competencies.

Another framework for teaching includes the use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Multiple Intelligences. These approaches are recommended to engage students through diverse activities such as visual, musical, and kinesthetic activities. The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is another major component of the 2016 curriculum. It recommends incorporating digital tools such as multimedia presentations, educational games, and online platforms to enhance classroom instruction.

The last document analyzed was the official policies for multigrade education in Ecuador (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2021). This analysis revealed the importance of inclusive education using both mediated learning and autonomous learning. In this sense, teachers are expected to alternate between teaching small groups directly and guiding peer teaching or independent but structured activities so that all students can progress according to their needs and abilities. Within this framework, the guidelines encourage the communicative approach by recommending activities such as songs, greetings, role plays, and short dialogues. These guidelines also recommend PBL with the aim of combining knowledge from different subjects with observation, creativity, and hands-on learning. For example, learners might carry out an activity that involves planting seeds, writing about the growth process in English, and applying math and science concepts to measure and analyze results. The use of drawing, movement, music, and oral storytelling has also been recommended to engage students and address multiple intelligences. Finally, the guidelines encourage teachers



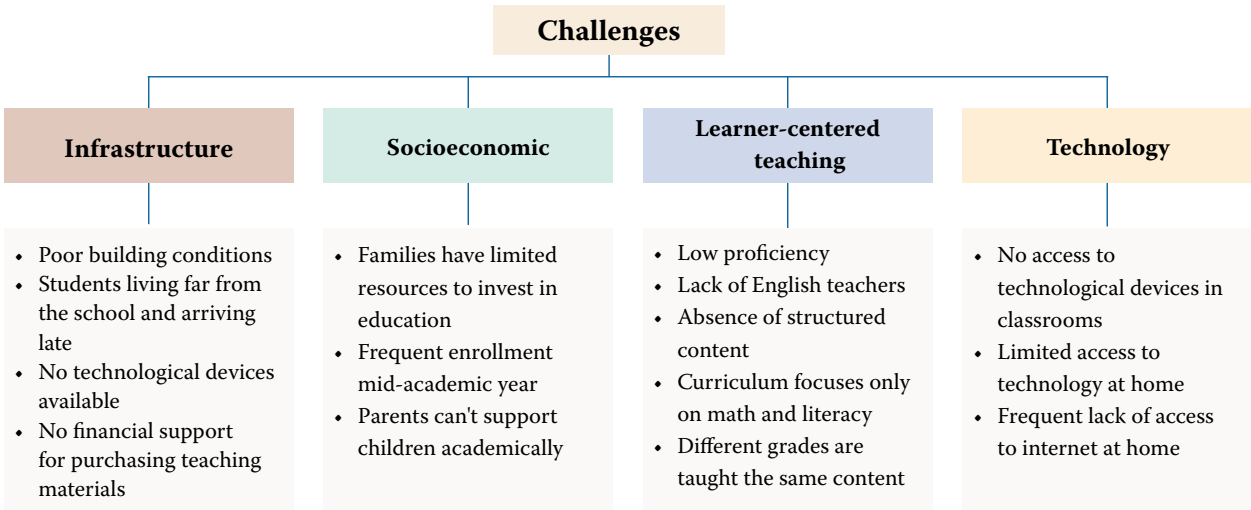
to incorporate flashcards, printed materials, mobile apps, and audio tools to reinforce vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension in the absence of technological tools in their multigrade classrooms.

3.2 Interviews

The interview stage of this study revealed the issue of limited teacher preparation and subjectspecific expertise, as the pre-service teachers acknowledged that their education did not involve any training regarding teaching multigrade classes, and that their colleagues employed in multigrade schools were not English language teachers. In the words of one participant, "Teachers are not English teachers, so they don't have enough knowledge to teach children." Another participant recalled how a colleague "didn't remember the basic words like numbers and animal vocabulary." One of the biggest challenges that the participants in this study faced was implementing studentcentered methodologies such as CLT and CLIL, as promoted in the 2016 curriculum. While the participants valued the idea of encouraging spoken interaction, they reported that students' lack of basic English knowledge and proficiency levels limited the use of such practices. As a teacher noted, "they never had English before when I started teaching", reflecting on the lack of English instruction at the multigrade school. She further noted, "I tried to use these activities [studentcentered activities] more with the older students. With the little ones, I had to keep it very simple." Another challenge related to the low attention span of the students and the distractive nature of applying student-centered and communicative activities in a class with multiple grades. In the words of one participant, "I was able to use simple CLT activities, such as *find someone who,* that didn't require a high proficiency level, but even those activities were difficult to implement because they caused a lot of distraction for the students of the other grades." Another participant confirmed this challenge by sharing, "When using songs, videos, or games in English, all the class would sing along, watch the video, or try to play the game. It was so frustrating because I couldn't control the class and implement CLT at the same time." Similarly, the use of multiple intelligences was challenging in the shared classroom setting. Although teachers used songs, drawings, and kinesthetic games to engage students, the shared classroom environment caused various distractions for the students. As one participant noted, "When I used a video or song with the older ones, the little ones would run around or do other things."

A challenging situation both participants encountered was lack of a structured English curriculum for multigrade students (See Figure 2). In the words of the participants, "Teachers just looked for a video and showed it," reflecting lack of planning or purpose for the activities selected. Another participant stated, "They use the same material for the second, third, and fourth grade." Regarding reasons for lack of structured materials, the participants cited governments' limited budget, high cost of English books, and poor economic status of the families living in remote places. One participant noted, "They [the families] don't even have money to buy paper." To respond to this problem, teachers had to resort to providing basic supplies such as pencils, crayons, and notebooks from

Figure 2. *Challenges of multigrade teaching*



Source: Provided by the authors

their own resources. They reported that the teachers "… need to provide that [all teaching materials]," because there is no other choice. Though some families contributed financially at the beginning of the year, these donations were minimal and short-lived. In the words of one participant, "Parents pay like, for example, $5 at the beginning of the year, and the teachers buy all of the materials."

On a different note, the participants in this study praised the multigrade guidelines for recommending the use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) and strategies based on Multiple Intelligences. PBL was most successful with older learners, especially when tied to real-life contexts. One teacher mentioned, "When I introduced projects where they could play, they liked it." However, the effectiveness of these projects was limited since PBL projects demand high engagement of the families in each project. Another teacher stated, "The parents were too busy with farming so they couldn't help with anything academic." This statement was confirmed by another participant who stated, "Families are mostly illiterate and can't help with any academic activity."

Another challenge was the use of technology in the classroom due to the school's limited technological resources. To address this, the teachers had to bring their own equipment. As one participant stated, "I used my own computer and internet connection." Even when some devices like projectors were available, their use was sometimes restricted by school leadership. Outside the classroom, most students had little exposure to digital tools. "They didn't know how to use a computer or a cellphone because they had to help their families with farming," one participant explained. Still, teachers adapted. One teacher stated, "I used an app called World Wall to create games, but since we didn't have internet, I turned them into kinesthetic activities." The school infrastructure also directly affected the learning environment. As one teacher described, "The roof was leaking, so we had to move the chairs when it was raining." Basic utilities were also inconsistent; electricity was unreliable. As one participant recalled, "There was no electricity, so when there is fog, so students have to study in the classroom with no light." Furthermore, neither of the schools had a library, and access to computers was nonexistent.

Another problem was that many children lived far from school, which affected their class attendance. One teacher noted, "Some students live around 40 minutes from the school, and they always arrive late." In these situations, the teachers demonstrated flexibility and recognized that such delays were because of rural living conditions. The stories also revealed that families often struggled to support their children's education. Farming and livestock responsibilities frequently took precedence. "Parents didn't have enough time to take their children to school," one teacher said. In other cases, family separation due to migration added layers of emotional and academic complexity. "There's a lot of immigration," a teacher explained. "Students live with their aunts, uncles, or grandparents because their parents are in the United States."

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the government-issued guidelines and policies for multigrade education in rural Ecuador to compare their applicability by multigrade schoolteachers in real life. The findings of this qualitative study revealed that pre-service teachers are not trained for teaching in multigrade classrooms. Also, newly qualified teachers face a wide range of infrastructural, socioeconomic, pedagogical, and technological challenges. The challenges identified in this study were categorized into four different categories: pedagogical, technological, infrastructural, and socioeconomic challenges. Pedagogical challenges include students' low proficiency levels, the absence of qualified English teachers in multigrade settings, the lack of a structured curriculum, and the teaching of the same content across different grade levels. Technological challenges involve limited access to digital devices both at school and at home, as well as unreliable or absent internet connectivity. Infrastructural challenges include poor building conditions and a lack of essential teaching materials and equipment. Socioeconomic challenges, the families' literacy problems, and limited financial resources affect their ability to support their children academically. In light of the identified challenges, several recommendations can be made. The use of differentiated instruction can be used to tackle educational challenges, as recommended in the guidelines for multigrade education (2021). Another effective approach is the use of peer-assisted learning, where more advanced students take on leadership roles to support their peers, as suggested in previous studies (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Sampson, 2016), as it promotes collaborative learning and helps to mitigate the effects of the absence of qualified English teachers in multigrade classrooms. Teachers can also adopt flexible lesson planning through the use of spiral curricula and individualized learning plans. This is in line with the recommendations made by Quail and Smyth (2014). Moreover, research highlights the value of contextualized and localized teaching materials; thus, creating local curricula and adaptable "To Do" lists to guide students' independent work could be beneficial (Ballesteros & Ocampo, 2016).

Regarding the use of CLT and student-centered approaches, the co-authors recommend the use of individual, simple but level-appropriate hands-on activities such as making crafts, coloring and cutting, or story-making activities to promote participatory learning. This study concludes that communicative teaching approaches can still provide a significant learning experience. Moreover, this study demonstrates that not all contexts can benefit from the use of technology due to limited resources. Therefore,

It is recommended that in areas with limited or no internet access, teachers turn to low-tech or no-tech resources, such as printed booklets.

it is recommended that in areas with limited or no internet access, teachers turn to low-tech or no-tech resources, such as printed booklets, as suggested by Carrete-Marín and Domingo-Peñafiel (2022) and Mortazavizadeh et al. (2017). As many teachers have to cover these costs without reimbursement, there is an urgent need to support education in these underserved areas through targeted funding for basic educational materials, such as stationery and school supplies. This could be achieved through improving community engagement in supplying materials and/or the community creating a supply fund. It is worth noting that in some countries, the government allocates bonuses for teachers employed in remote areas to cover the costs of stationery, which could mitigate this problem.

Lastly, this study reveals that there is a significant need for the cooperation of national universities of education and local communities to train competent English teachers to teach in remote areas. Therefore, the co-authors recommend planning and implementing in-service and pre-service teacher education programs that address the realities of multigrade education in Ecuador (Thephavongsa, 2018). Allocating scholarships to qualifying candidates who live in remote places to be trained at the national universities of education and then relocate to their own remote context to work, educate, and transform their local educational context could be another solution to tackle the challenges identified in this study. Furthermore, to ensure adequate practice and exposure of pre-service teachers to multigrade classroom realities, community outreach programs (*vinculación*) can be developed to specifically target underserved areas with the goal of both addressing communal educational needs and creating an opportunity for pre-service teachers to put their knowledge into practice.

Finally, it is important to note that conducting this study was not without limitations. One limitation relates to the nature of qualitative studies in general, which are not generalizable. Hence, drawing conclusions must be done with caution. Another limitation lies in the small sample size used in this study. Given the remoteness of the multigrade school and the difficulty of accessing teachers in this context, the researchers were limited in their reach and could not use a larger sample size. Future studies may take advantage of the reach and resources of pertinent government organizations involved in education to investigate challenges of multigrade education in larger sample sizes.

Funding

This research received no funding.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they do not have conflict of interest.

Ethical implications

This study was conducted with full adherence to ethical guidelines. Prior to the initiation of this study, informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Authors' contribution

Research design, Omid Kalantar; Data analysis (Omid Kalantar); methodology (Omid Kalantar); manuscript writing (Omid Kalantar, Tatiana Gavilanes, Gisella Robles); manuscript review (Omid Kalantar). All the authors have read and approved the submitted version.

Declaration of generative AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 5 to proofread the final manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the contents and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Annex A

Document Analysis Guide
Documents Analyzed

English as a Foreign Language Curriculum (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016)
Lineamientos Curriculares para Instituciones Educativas Multigrado (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2021)

1. **Multigrade Teacher Training**
   Checking for subjects that train pre-service teachers to teach in multigrade settings.
2. **Pedagogical Orientation**
   Examination of the teaching approaches promoted in the documents (e.g., Communicative Language Teaching, task-based learning, learner-centered **instruction).**
3. **Multiple Intelligences and Learning Modalities**
   Analysis of references to diverse learning styles, modalities, and differentiated instructional strategies.
4. **Guidance for Multigrade Instruction**
   Examination of how the documents address teaching in multigrade classrooms, including differentiation, grouping, and instructional flexibility.
5. **Learner Autonomy and Mediated Learning**
   Analysis of expectations regarding autonomous learning, teacher mediation, and the balance between guided and independent work.
6. **Integration of Technology and ICT**
   Identification of expectations related to technology use, digital tools, and the development of digital literacy.
7. **Assumptions about Resources and Infrastructure**
   Examination of implicit or explicit assumptions regarding access to electricity, internet, materials, and technological tools.
8. **Teacher Roles and Responsibilities**
   Analysis of how teachers' roles are constructed, including expectations for planning, material development, and methodological expertise.
9. **Adaptation to Rural and Low-Resource Contexts**
   Identification of strategies proposed to address contextual constraints in rural and multigrade schools.
10. **Alignment between National Curriculum and Multigrade Guidelines**
    Comparison of pedagogical goals and instructional expectations across the two documents.
11. **Tensions and Gaps**
    Identification of potential mismatches between policy expectations and the practical realities of rural multigrade classrooms.

Annex B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Can you describe what it was like living and working in the rural community where the school was located?
2. How would you describe the general infrastructure of the school?
3. How were grades organized in the classrooms, and how many students were in each group?

4. What challenges did you experience when teaching multiple grades in the same classroom?
5. Did you implement communicative or student-centered teaching approaches in this context?
6. What challenges did you face when using classroom activities such as games, role-plays, or interactive tasks?
7. How were English lessons planned, and was there an established syllabus or curriculum?
8. Did you use project-based learning in your classes?
9. What challenges did you face when implementing project-based learning in a multigrade rural classroom?
10. Did you use a multiple intelligences or learning-styles approach in your teaching?
11. What challenges did you encounter when applying this approach in the classroom?
12. What technological resources were available at the school for teaching English?
13. What were the challenges of integrating technology, and how did you overcome those challenges?
14. Did students have access to technology or the internet at home?
15. Are there any additional challenges related to teaching English in rural multigrade schools that you would like to mention?

References

Aksoy, N. (2008). Multigrade schooling in Turkey: An overview. *International Journal of Educational Development, 28*(2), 218-228. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.05.002

Ballesteros, M., & Ocampo, R. O. (2016). Best practices of multigrade teaching in Luna, Apayao, Philippines. *International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning, 3*(6), 61-73. https://www.noveltyjournals.com/upload/paper/BEST PRACTICES OF MULTIGRADE-848.pdf

Berry, C., & Little, A. W. (2006). Multigrade teaching in London, England. In A. W. Little (Ed.), *Education for all and multigrade teaching: Challenges and opportunities* (pp. 67-86). Netherlands: Springer.

Buaraphan, K., Inrit, B., & Kochasila, W. (2018). Current policy and practice concerning multigrade teaching in Thailand. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences, 39*(3), 496-501. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2018.06.008

Cárdenas Sánchez, S., Huera Paltán, B., & Machado Herrera, P. (2024). Use of technology to learn

English in Ecuadorian classrooms: A case study in Morona Santiago province. *AlfaPublications, 6*(3), 127-137. https://doi.org/10.33262/ap.v6i3.512

Carrete-Marín, N., & Domingo-Peñafiel, L. (2022). Textbooks and teaching materials in rural schools: A Systematic review. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal, 12*(2), 67-94. https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.1288

Checchi, D., & De Paola, M. (2018). The effect of multigrade classes on cognitive and noncognitive skills. Causal evidence exploiting minimum class size rules in Italy . *Economics of Education Review, 67*, 235-253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.10.003

Chiappe, A., Cardenas, F. L., & Rozo, H. (2025). Teaching strategies in multigrade classrooms and their implications for digital environments: A literature review. *Revista Brasileira de Educação, 30*, e300062. https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-24782025300062

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.

Doğan F.Ş., Çapan S.A., Ciğerci F.M. (2020). Dilemmas in teaching English in multigrade classrooms: Classroom teachers' perceptions on English as a foreign language course. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language), 14*, 52-68.

Du Plessis, P., & Mestry, R. (2019). Teachers for rural schools - a challenge for South

Africa. *South African Journal of Education, 39*(1). S1-S9. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39ns1a1774

Echavarría, R. R., & Orosz, A. (2021). Buen vivir and changes in education in Ecuador, 2006-2016. *Latin American Perspectives, 48*(3), 119-135. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X211009270

Engin, G. (2018). The opinions of the multigrade classroom teachers on multigrade class teaching practices (multiple case analysis: Netherlands-Turkey example). *International Journal of Progressive Education, 14*(1), 177-200. https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2018.129.13

Espinoza Andrade, J. A. (2018). *The politics of public construction in a globalized world: Imagining urban space in Ecuador*. (Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit van Amsteedam). https://bit.ly/4942aZC

Hargreaves, E., Montero, C., Chau, N., Sibli, M., & Thanh, T. (2001). Multigrade teaching in Peru, Sri Lanka and Vietnam: An overview. *International Journal of*

Educational Development, 21(6), 499-520. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-0593(01)00013-X

Herrera Pavo, M., Cochancela Patiño, G., Loaiza Sánchez, K., Arias Sinchi, M., Mansutti Rodríguez, A., & Estrada García, A. (2024). En busca de la equidad: la calidad educativa de las escuelas unidocentes, bidocentes y multigrado en Ecuador. *Boletín ObservaUNAE*, 1-50. https://revistas.unae.edu.ec/index.php/observaUNAE/article/view/1024

Hyry-Beihammer, E. K., & Hascher, T. (2015). Multi-grade teaching practices in Austrian and Finnish primary schools. *International Journal of Educational Research, 74*, 104-113. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2015.07.002

Kormos, E., & Wisdom, K. (2021). Rural schools and the digital divide: Technology in the learning experience. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education, 11*(1), 25-39. https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2021.v11n1p25-39

Little, A. W. (2001). Multigrade teaching: towards an international research and policy agenda. *International Journalof Educational Development, 21*(6), 481-497. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0738-0593(01)00011-6

Little, A. W. (2004). *Learning and teaching in multigrade settings*. Paper prepared for the UNESCO EFA Monitoring Report, 1-25. http://bit.ly/47aTDBH

Little, A. W. (2006). *Education for all and multigrade teaching: Challenges and opportunities*. Springer.

Magno, J. (2014). Teaching practices of mathematics teachers in selected public and private elementary schools. *JPAIR Multidisciplinary Research, 17*(1), 13-21. https://doi.org/10.7719/jpair.v17i1.277

McEwan, P. J. (1998). The effectiveness of multigrade schools in Colombia. *International Journal of Educational Development, 18*(6), 435-452. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-0593(98)00023-6

McEwan, P. J. (2008). Evaluating multigrade school reform in Latin America. *Comparative Education, 44*(4), 465-483. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060802481504

Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador. (2016). *Curriculum for Levels of Mandatory Education: English Area*. http://bit.ly/4n9SpN2

Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador. (2021). *Lineamientos curriculares para instituciones educativas multigrado*. http://bit.ly/3JcZuyl

Mortazavizadeh, S. H., Nili, M. R., Isfahani, A. R. N., & Hassani, M. (2017). Teachers' lived experiences about teaching-learning process in multi-grade classes. *Journal of Education and Learning, 6*(4), 354-363. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v6n4p354

Msimanga, M. (2020). Teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms: The LEPO framework. *Africa Education Review, 17*(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2019.1671877

Mulryan-Kyne, C. (2007). The preparation of teachers for multigrade teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 23*(4), 501-514. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.12.003

Portilla-Faicán, G. I., Sánchez-Narváez, J. E., Ortiz López, R. M., Ortiz López, M. V., Saquicela Maldonado, C. E., & Miranda-Quizhpe, D. C. (2025). Estudio bibliográfico sobre el rol de docentes de escuelas multigrado de Ecuador. RECIE. Revista Caribeña de Investigación Educativa, 9, e9766. https://doi.org/10.32541/recie.v9.766

Psacharopoulos, G., Rojas, C., & Vélez, E. (1993). Achievement evaluation of Colombia's *Escuela Nueva*: Is multigrade the answer? *Comparative Education Review, 37*(3), 263-276. https://doi.org/10.1086/447190

Pumashunta Ortega, W. J. (2025). *Implementación del modelo multigrado para la inclusión y calidad educativa de las escuelas unidocentes, bidocentes y pluridocentes en la nacionalidad Achuar del Ecuador, provincia de Morona Santiago, cantón Taisha, parroquia Huasaga* [Master's thesis, Universidad Central del Ecuador]. Repositorio Institucional UCE https://www.dspace.uce.edu.ec/handle/25000/39169

Quail, A., & Smyth, E. (2014). Multigrade teaching and age composition of the class: The influence on academic and social outcomes among students. Teaching and Teacher Education, 43, 80-90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.06.004

Quinco-Cadosales, M. N. (2011). Enhancement activities for the day care centers and development workers. *JPAIR Multidisciplinary Research Journal, 6*(1), 247-260. https://doi.org/10.7719/jpair.v6i1.148

Quinco-Cadosales, M. N. (2017). Teaching efficacy of elementary student teachers. *Journal of Research in Administrative Sciences, 6(*1), 7-12. https://doi.org/10.47609/JRAS20170102

Ramrathan, L., & Mzimela, J. (2016). Teaching reading in a multi-grade class: Teachers' adaptive skills and teacher agency in teaching across grade R and grade 1. *South African Journal of Childhood Education, 6*(2), a448. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v6i2.448

Saant, S., Ramírez, Á. M., & Tsere, P. (2023). The limits of reading programs in rural education in Ecuador. *Migration Letters, 20*(S10), 681-689. https://doi.org/10.59670/ml.v20iS10.5367

Salazar-Gómez, E. & Tobón, S. (2018). Análisis documental del proceso de formación docente acorde con la sociedad del conocimiento. *Revista Espacios, 39*(53), 17. https://www.revistaespacios.com/cited2017/cited2017-17.html

Sampson, C. (2016). One teacher's experiences of teaching reading in an urban multi-grade foundation phase class. *Perspectives in Education, 34*(2), 83-96.

Thephavongsa, S. (2018). Enhancing the teaching skills of the multi-grade teachers through lesson study. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 17*(4), 71-87. https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.17.4.5

Tiernan, B., Casserly, A. M., & Maguire, G. (2018). Towards inclusive education: Instructional practices to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs in multi-grade settings.

International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24(7), 787-807. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1483438

UNESCO. (2015). *Education for all 2000-2015: Achievements and challenges*. UNESCO Publishing. https://doi.org/10.54676/LBSF6974

Universidad Nacional de Educación. (2023). Malla curricular PINE. https://unae.edu.ec/wpcontent/uploads/2023/12/MALLA-CURRICULAR-PINE.pdf

Zambrano-Trujillo, S. L., Lara-Lara, F., & Cano de la Cruz, Y. (2022). Maestras de multigrado en Esmeraldas (Ecuador): Una realidad silenciada. *ALTERIDAD. Revista de Educación, 17*(2), 304-317. https://doi.org/10.17163/alt.v17n2.2022.10