

Redefining rural education: exploring EFL teachers' perceptions and recommendations for enhanced human resource management practices

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ABSTRACT

In the realm of education, the efficacy of human resource management (HRM) is paramount in determining the quality of instruction, enhancing learners' experiences and driving overall educational success. Despite its importance, existing research on HRM in education has predominantly been from an administrative or policy perspective. Consequently, this study purposed to fill this research void by exploring the perceptions of HRM practices amongst 97 rural English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Sulawesi, Indonesia, and offering tangible recommendations for enhancement based on these teachers' insights. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach of questionnaires and interviews, the research disclosed that many rural EFL teachers exhibited an indifferent attitude towards HRM practices. However, a detailed analysis from interviews uncovered areas for potential enhancements in HRM, specifically in job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and performance recognition. This paper concludes by outlining practical recommendations, such as enhancing communication conduits between teachers and human resource departments to better acknowledge and address teachers' concerns, and proposes further research on other potential factors that might affect teachers' perceptions of HRM practices.

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1. Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) profoundly influences the professional development of teachers, particularly those working in rural English as a foreign language (EFL) settings (Cheng et al., 2023; Jyoti et al., 2020). The strategic approach of HRM, primarily implemented by the education bureau and school administrators, focuses on policies and systems aimed at enhancing the productivity and satisfaction of individuals within an organization (Mathew et al., 2022; Yusriadi, 2020). These agents are pivotal in translating HRM theories into practice, ensuring that strategies such as job satisfaction, teachers' professional development, motivation and performance recognition not only theoretical concepts but are actively applied in educational settings. One of the key aspects influenced by HRM practices, overseen by these agents, is job satisfaction among teachers. Job satisfaction is essential for fostering a positive work environment and ensuring the overall well-being of educators. Research suggests that effective HRM

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practices, such as employee-benefit design and performance appraisal, significantly contribute to heightened job satisfaction among teachers (Ostad et al., 2019; Rezaei et al., 2022). These practices, when effectively administered by the education bureau and school administrators, create a robust framework for nurturing the professional growth of educators. Thus, these agents play a critical role in the successful implementation of HRM strategies, directly impacting the development and satisfaction of teachers in rural EFL settings.

In the context of rural EFL education, where challenges may differ significantly from urban settings, HRM policies need to be finely tuned to address these specific needs and concerns of teachers, ultimately impacting their job satisfaction positively. For instance, rural EFL educators often grapple with limited access to modern teaching resources and technology, a factor not as prevalent in urban contexts (Ostad et al., 2019). Professional development is another critical dimension affected by these unique rural challenges. HRM's involvement in overseeing training and development programs is essential, ensuring that educators in rural EFL contexts have access to resources that enhance their professional skills, particularly in areas such as digital literacy and differentiated instruction strategies that are often overlooked in rural education settings (Jyoti et al., 2020). By tailoring these programs to the unique challenges faced by rural EFL teachers, such as geographic isolation and limited professional networking opportunities, HRM contributes to the creation of a skilled and adaptable teaching workforce, positively impacting the quality of education in these areas.

Motivation is intrinsically linked to HRM practices, influencing the dedication and enthusiasm of teachers in their roles (Podymaka & Korobkina, 2022; Zhenyu et al., 2022). In rural settings, where teachers may feel isolated or undervalued, recognizing these challenges allows HRM to implement motivational strategies effectively (Al-Kazlah & Badkook, 2022). These might include targeted recognition programs that acknowledge the unique hardships and achievements of rural educators, or personalized support systems that provide mental health resources and community-building opportunities, addressing the often-overlooked aspect of social and emotional well-being in these environments (Iqbal et al., 2020). In a nutshell, HRM practices in rural EFL settings significantly enhance job satisfaction by tailoring policies such as employee-benefit design and performance appraisal to address the unique challenges faced by teachers. This fosters a positive work environment, supports teachers' professional development through tailored training programs and promotes motivation by implementing strategies that align with the specific needs of teachers. Such measures ultimately contribute to a skilled, adaptable teaching workforce with effective performance recognition, acknowledging the distinct challenges and triumphs of teaching in rural contexts.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in HRM theory, adopting the resource-based view of the firm, which emphasizes the strategic importance of unique resources and capabilities within an organization (Bamey, 2021). In rural EFL education, these resources are the teachers, whose skills, knowledge and experience are critical for achieving educational objectives. This perspective is complemented by Herzberg's theory of job satisfaction and Maslow's theory of motivation, providing insights into factors that influence teacher satisfaction and motivation in challenging environments like rural EFL teaching (Navy, 2020; Singh & Bhattacharjee, 2020). These theoretical lenses help in understanding how HRM practices can be tailored to enhance the work experiences and effectiveness of educators in rural EFL settings. The integration of these theories into the analysis of HRM practices ensures a comprehensive approach, taking into account both the strategic assets of an organization and the psychological needs and motivations of teachers. In rural EFL settings, the connection between EFL and teachers is particularly profound, as the teachers serve as the primary resources crucial to the success of educational objectives. Their specialized skills in teaching EFL are invaluable, and their role in navigating the challenges unique to rural contexts is pivotal. Aligning with HRM theories, recognizing teachers as strategic assets underscores the importance of tailoring HRM practices to the specific needs of rural EFL educators, ensuring that the policies implemented address the challenges they face, ultimately fostering job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and effective performance recognition.

Effective HRM practices are essential in rural EFL education to tackle a range of unique challenges. These challenges often include geographic isolation, limited access to contemporary teaching resources, and a scarcity of professional development opportunities tailored for rural contexts (Iqbal et al.,

2020; Ostad et al., 2019). To address these issues, HRM strategies in rural settings must be multifaceted. Firstly, the implementation of targeted training programs is vital. These programs, designed to enhance job satisfaction and motivation, equip teachers with the skills needed to overcome challenges such as professional isolation and limited resource access (Rezai et al., 2022). By facilitating connectivity and access to new educational practices, these training initiatives can help teachers stay current with educational trends and methodologies. Secondly, addressing the scarcity of professional development opportunities is crucial. HRM in rural areas should focus on creating specialized training programs that are specifically designed for the unique conditions of rural teaching. This involves not only addressing educational needs but also factors like lower compensation, limited career growth opportunities and the perceived isolation of rural life, which can hinder the attraction and retention of skilled educators (Stahl et al., 2020). To create a more stable and motivated teaching workforce, HRM strategies must include compelling incentives and supportive measures. This can be achieved by customizing HRM practices to meet the specific requirements of rural areas, such as developing flexible work environments and recognizing the unique contributions of rural teachers. Moreover, the conditions in rural schools have a significant impact on teacher satisfaction and motivation. Therefore, HRM must also address aspects like work-life balance, community integration and professional growth opportunities (Fletcher et al., 2020). In doing so, HRM practices play a pivotal role in optimizing the performance of educators and aligning them with the strategic objectives of their organizations. Lastly, the complexities of teaching EFL in rural areas necessitate HRM strategies that are specifically designed for these environments. This includes developing remote training programs and offering tailored incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers (Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022). A deep understanding of HRM in these settings is critical not only for enhancing EFL teachers' work experiences but also for improving student learning outcomes. By addressing these various facets, HRM can effectively contribute to the success of rural EFL education.

There has been a surge of research has been devoted around the issues of HRM practices in rural education context. Ahmed and Abbas (2022) investigated the impact of HRM practices on faculty job satisfaction in private universities, drawing a direct correlation between faculty satisfaction and education quality. However, its limitation lies in its exclusive focus on private universities, potentially restricting its generalizability to other types of educational institutions or settings. Next, Connolly (2022) delved into the effects of HRM practices on teacher education, with a specific lens on the casualization of academic staff in Ireland. While providing valuable insights into the Irish educational context, the study's geographical focus limits its applicability to other regions, potentially overlooking varied HRM dynamics in different cultural and educational environments. In a broader international context, Schotter et al. (2021) examined the relationship between international HRM and institutions. Their work highlighted the need for integrating diverse theoretical frameworks for a comprehensive understanding of HRM's role. Nonetheless, the primary limitation of this research is its theoretical focus, which may not directly translate into practical HRM application or scenarios, limiting its utility for practitioners in the field. Finally, Jyoti et al. (2020) focused on the impact of HRM practices on teacher performance in rural schools of Jammu and Kashmir. While the study provided important insights, especially in the context of human resource analytics, its limitation stems from its cross-sectional nature and the sole focus on teacher performance. This narrow scope suggests the need for future research to encompass broader aspects like students' academic performance and overall school performance to fully understand the impact of HRM practices in educational settings.

The existing research on HRM in education, while offering valuable insights, reveals notable gaps, particularly in understanding HRM's role across diverse educational settings. Most studies have concentrated on general education contexts, often overlooking specialized areas such as EFL and the distinct dynamics of rural areas. This oversight indicates a significant need for more targeted research that addresses the unique HRM challenges and opportunities in both specific educational environments like EFL and in rural contexts, where resources and needs can differ markedly from urban settings. Furthermore, the studies as reviewed above (e.g. Ahmed and Abbas 2022; Connolly, 2022; Jyoti et al., 2020; Schotter et al., 2021) typically lack practical recommendations for improving HRM practices, a vital component for guiding effective policy and enhancing educational management in varied contexts. Building on these, scholars should go beyond identifying challenges and extend their efforts to

propose practical solutions. These could encompass tailored professional development programs for EFL teachers, acknowledging the specific skills required for language instruction, as well as HRM strategies that account for the unique needs of educators in rural settings. Establishing a direct link between research insights and actionable measures will not only enrich the understanding of HRM in education but also provide invaluable guidance for policymakers and educational administrators seeking to enhance HRM practices in diverse and specialized contexts (Obedgiu, 2017; Wei, 2022). Ultimately, this approach ensures that HRM policies are not only informed by research but also directly contribute to the improvement of teachers' professional experiences in EFL and rural educational settings. To effectively fill these gaps, future research should emphasize diverse and inclusive methodologies, delve deeper into the nuances of specific and rural educational settings and crucially, offer actionable recommendations to improve HRM practices, thereby ensuring a more holistic and applicable understanding of HRM in education.

The narrative provided accurately reflects the situation in Indonesia, where English is extensively taught as a foreign language, especially in rural regions. The prevailing top-down approach to HRM in Indonesian schools frequently neglects the unique challenges confronted by rural EFL teachers, potentially leading to disparities in job satisfaction, motivation and performance. This matter is of significant importance, given the critical role English proficiency holds in acquiring higher education opportunities, employment and in participating in international communication. Furthermore, Indonesia's varied geographic and socioeconomic landscape implies that rural teachers often face issues like geographical isolation, scarce resources and limited professional development opportunities compared to their urban counterparts. However, the experiences and voices of rural EFL teachers in Indonesia are glaringly absent from HRM discourse. Several studies, including those by Cahyadi et al. (2022) and Simarmata (2023), have delved into HRM practices in the Indonesian context but have largely ignored the distinctive circumstances of rural EFL teachers, lacking in-depth insight into the challenges faced by this group and failing to suggest tailored strategies for their inclusion and development. This oversight creates a substantial research gap, highlighting the need for detailed examination and research on HRM practices relevant to rural EFL teachers in Indonesia. EFL teachers in rural areas in Indonesia perceive current HRM practices as predominantly top-down and inadequately addressing their unique challenges, leading to disparities in job satisfaction, motivation and professional development (Sasere & Makhasane, 2023; Xiong & Peng, 2022). The absence of tailored strategies in HRM practices leaves rural EFL teachers feeling overlooked, with limited opportunities for performance recognition and inclusion in discussions about their specific circumstances. In this context, where English is extensively taught in rural areas, understanding the specific HRM needs and challenges of rural EFL teachers is crucial. This manuscript aims to bridge this gap by providing insights into the effective management of rural EFL teachers, contributing to the development of more targeted and efficient HRM practices. Hence, understanding and addressing the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers regarding HRM practices could significantly advance English language education, particularly in rural areas of Indonesia.

In relation to the foregoing discussions, this study seeks to answer the following pivotal research questions: How do EFL teachers in rural areas perceive and experience the impact of current HRM practices on their job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and performance recognition? Based on the experiences and insights of EFL teachers, what recommendations can be formulated to tailor HRM practices and policies to better support the professional needs and ameliorate the experiences of these teachers? By addressing these research questions, this study will furnish a much-needed teacher perspective on HRM practices in rural Indonesian schools, with the ultimate aim of informing more effective, equitable and contextually suitable HRM policies in the field of EFL education.

20 2. Method

2.1. Research design

The primary objective of this research is to explore the perceptions and experiences of HRM practices amongst EFL teachers in rural areas. This focus on rural areas stems from a recognized gap in existing

literature, which predominantly concentrates on urban educational settings, potentially overlooking the unique challenges and opportunities in rural EFL teaching environments. Additionally, it aims to proffer valuable recommendations for enhancing HRM practices based on the insights gathered from these teachers. In pursuit of this goal, the research has elected to adopt a mixed-method research design, a widely acclaimed approach that amalgamates both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This methodological choice is supported and championed by leading experts in the field of educational research (e.g. Hirose & Creswell, 2023) and affords a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic at hand.

The data collection phase of this study spanned over a period of five months, allowing for an in-depth exploration of seasonal and academic year-related variations in HRM practices and teacher experiences. By employing a mixed-method research design, the study aims to amass rich qualitative data that illuminates the intricate nuances and unique experiences of EFL teachers in rural settings over this extended period. Concurrently, it seeks to incorporate quantitative data to discern broader patterns and trends, bolstering the overall validity and reliability of the findings. This integration of disparate research methods over a substantial duration enables the researchers to attain a holistic perspective, enriching the exploration of HRM practices within the context of rural EFL teaching.

2.2. Research participants

The study focused on EFL teachers originating from the rural areas of Indonesia, with specific emphasis on those employed within Central and South Sulawesi. Through the utilization of convenience and purposive sampling techniques, a diverse and representative group was meticulously selected. This group encompassed individuals of various ages and genders, possessing a broad range of teaching experiences and academic qualifications. Out of 150 potential candidates, 97 EFL teachers opted to participate in the study, forming the final research sample. The decision to include 97 participants was based on several key factors. Firstly, it was important to have a sample large enough to provide statistical significance and varied insights, ensuring a robust analysis of the data. Secondly, this number was manageable in terms of resource allocation, allowing for thorough data collection and analysis within the project's time frame and budgetary constraints. Lastly, the participants represented a substantial portion of the EFL teaching population in these rural areas, thus ensuring a diverse cross-section of experiences and perspectives in the research findings.

Each of these teachers was contacted via email or WhatsApp and voluntarily completed the questionnaire, proffering valuable insights into the teaching experiences and challenges in these rural regions. Additionally, a smaller subset of seven teachers from this participant pool was selected for follow-up interviews. These teachers were chosen based on a combination of factors including their unique responses to the questionnaire, years of experience and geographical diversity within the rural areas of Central and South Sulawesi. This selection aimed to ensure a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives on HRM practices in rural settings. The criteria were specifically designed to include teachers who provided insightful, nuanced or notably distinct responses in the questionnaire, which indicated a deeper or more complex engagement with HRM issues. This approach was instrumental in ensuring that the follow-up interviews would yield rich, detailed qualitative data, complementing the broader patterns identified through the questionnaire responses.

As an acknowledgement of their time and contribution, all participants were proffered a small incentive in the form of a voucher. Prior to initiating the research, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were thoroughly briefed about the study's purpose, their role and the confidentiality measures instituted. This practice, aligning with ethical research guidelines, was pivotal in fostering trust and respect between the researchers and participants. For clarity and enhanced understanding, the demographic details of the participants are organized and presented in Tables 1 and 2.

2.3. Research instruments

Two primary instruments were utilized for data collection in this research, aiming to capture a comprehensive understanding of the EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions of HRM practices in rural areas.

Table 1. Demographic information of all the participants.

Working area	Respondent		Qualification
	Male	Female	
Central Sulawesi	19	33	Bachelor degree
South Sulawesi	16	29	Bachelor degree
Total	35	59	

Table 2. Demographic information of participants in the interview session.

Respondent	Age (years)	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Qualification
T1	37	Male	8	Bachelor degree
T2	42	Female	15	Bachelor degree
T3	41	Female	15	Bachelor degree
T4	32	Female	7	Bachelor degree
T5	32	Male	6	Bachelor degree
T6	43	Female	17	Bachelor degree
T7	37	Female	8	Bachelor degree

The first instrument was a self-developed questionnaire, consisting of a series of closed-ended questions structured around themes drawn from pertinent literature, including job satisfaction (Madigan & Kim, 2021), professional development (Yaakob et al., 2020), motivation (Piatak et al., 2020) and performance recognition (Pak, 2022). This questionnaire employed a Likert scale format, where respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' and 5 representing 'strongly agree'. This format was chosen to quantify the attitudes and perceptions of the participants in a structured manner, allowing for clear, concise and consistent responses.

Administered electronically, primarily via email and WhatsApp, the questionnaire allowed participants to complete it at their convenience. This digital approach facilitated easier access for teachers in remote rural areas and ensured a high response rate. To ensure its effectiveness and reliability, the questionnaire was rigorously validated by experts in the field and underwent a pilot study with a sample of 30 EFL teachers not included in the main study. This preliminary testing resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.85, indicating high reliability of the instrument.

The second instrument was an interview guide, crafted in response to the insights gleaned from the questionnaire results. Interviews were conducted as one-on-one sessions, allowing for a personalized and in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences. These interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants, often in their own educational settings or via online platforms when physical meetings were not feasible. Each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data collected. This tool was essential for capturing the nuances of the conversations and enabled a thorough analysis of the responses later. The use of a voice recorder was agreed upon in advance with the participants, with assurances of confidentiality and the option for them to review the recordings if desired.

The themes of job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and performance recognition were chosen based on established theoretical frameworks in HRM and educational psychology, specifically informed by Herzberg's theory of job satisfaction as discussed in Singh and Bhattacharjee (2020), and Maslow's theory of motivation as explored in Navy (2020). These selected themes reflect critical aspects of HRM in educational settings as identified in prior research, ensuring that the questionnaire comprehensively covered the various dimensions impacting EFL teachers' experiences in rural areas. This tool was devised to afford a broad view of the participants' experiences and perspectives, while the interviews provided a platform for deeper, qualitative exploration.

2.4. Data analysis

The collected data were subjected to two distinct modes of analysis, aligning with their respective nature. For the questionnaire responses, a descriptive quantitative analysis approach was employed. In this approach, statistical software such as SPSS version 26 was used to interpret the data through statistical summaries, including mean scores, standard deviations and frequency distributions. These statistical

analyses facilitated an understanding of the overall patterns and trends amongst the EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding HRM practices in their rural settings.

In contrast, the data derived from the interview sessions were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, a qualitative method. This process involved several stages, starting with a meticulous transcription of the recorded interviews. The transcribed data were then systematically coded. These codes were examined and grouped into broader categories, from which key themes were identified, analyzed and interpreted. These themes, which emerged organically from the teachers' detailed responses, allowed for a richer, more nuanced exploration of their experiences. By identifying recurring and significant patterns in the responses, thematic analysis furnished deeper insights into the specific challenges and rewards of EFL teachers' roles in rural educational environments. This method was instrumental in highlighting the subjective, personal aspects of the data, complementing the more objective, numerical insights gleaned from the questionnaire.

3. Findings

The research findings can be divided into two parts. The first part focuses on EFL teachers' perceptions of HRM practices, while the second part explores the recommendations provided by teachers in response to the questionnaire results regarding areas where HRM can be improved.

3.1. EFL teacher perception and experiences on HRM practices

In this subsection, we explore EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences concerning HRM practices, with a specific focus on aspects like job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and performance recognition.

The data in Table 3 reveals a generally neutral level of job satisfaction among EFL teachers in rural schools, reflected in an average mean of 3.0 across all related items. Notably, the standard deviations, hovering around 1.0, indicate a significant range in responses. The aspect of HRM contributing to a positive work environment received a slightly less positive mean score of 2.9, suggesting potential room for improvement. The accompanying standard deviation of 1.1 underscores varied experiences and perceptions among teachers in this regard. The highest mean score of 3.2 was associated with feeling valued and respected, a crucial element of job satisfaction. This positive result suggests that, on average, HRM practices contribute to teachers feeling valued. However, the item concerning satisfaction with grievance redressal mechanisms had the lowest mean score of 2.8, indicating a potential area in need of enhancement. The corresponding standard deviation of 1.2 underscores differing experiences, suggesting varying efficacy of these mechanisms among teachers. In summary, while the overall job satisfaction level among EFL teachers tends toward neutrality, the data point to specific areas for potential improvement, particularly in terms of grievance redressal and the impact of HRM policies on creating a positive work environment. These insights present an opportunity to enhance job satisfaction through targeted improvements in these identified areas.

The data in Table 4 presents a nuanced view of how HRM policies impact the professional development of EFL teachers in rural schools. The average score of 3.04 suggests an average level of satisfaction. However, the standard deviations (ranging from 0.9 to 1.2) highlight diverse experiences among teachers, indicating varying perceptions of the impact of these policies. The highest-scoring aspect, career progression opportunities in EFL teaching (3.2), reflects a generally positive perception. Conversely, the

Table 3. Job satisfaction.

Statements	Mean	Std. deviation
I am satisfied with the current HRM practices in my rural school.	3.0	1.0
The current HRM practices in my rural school positively impact my job satisfaction.	3.1	0.9
The HRM policies in my rural school contribute to a positive work environment for EFL teaching.	2.9	1.1
The HRM practices at my rural school meet my expectations as an EFL teacher.	3.0	1.0
I feel valued and respected as an EFL teacher because of the HRM practices in my rural school.	3.2	0.9
I am satisfied with the grievance redressal mechanisms for EFL teachers in my rural school.	2.8	1.2
Average mean	3.0	

lowest score of 2.9, associated with HRM practices supporting adaptability to changes in teaching methods or curriculum, indicates a potential area for improvement. The significant standard deviations underscore the diverse experiences and perceptions among teachers, suggesting potential differences in policy implementation or perception. This diversity offers an opportunity for HRM to investigate further and ensure policies are universally beneficial. In conclusion, while the overall perception of HRM's impact on EFL teachers' professional development is neutral, targeted improvements, particularly in supporting adaptability to changes, could enhance overall job satisfaction. These findings provide valuable insights for potential enhancements to HRM policies.

Analyzing the data in Table 5 reveals a general trend of neutrality regarding the impact of HRM practices in rural schools on the motivation and satisfaction of EFL teachers. The average mean score of 3.12 indicates a balanced perspective. The highest score, associated with recognition and appreciation of work (3.4), underscores the importance of acknowledgment and positive reinforcement in motivating teachers and enhancing job satisfaction. Conversely, the item related to supporting a balance between teaching duties and personal life scored the least positively at 2.9, suggesting a potential area for improvement. Achieving a good work-life balance is crucial for job satisfaction and overall well-being. Significant variation in responses, with standard deviations ranging from 1.0 to 1.2, indicates diverse experiences and views among teachers. This diversity may stem from differences in HRM practices implementation, personal circumstances or subjective interpretations. In conclusion, while the overall level of motivation among EFL teachers due to HRM practices appears neutral, there are clear areas for improvement. Providing support for a better work-life balance and continuing to recognize and appreciate the work of teachers could be key focus areas to enhance motivation.

Reviewing the data in Table 6, it is evident that the perception of HRM practices regarding performance recognition, rewards and appraisals among EFL teachers in rural schools is generally neutral. The average mean of 3.05 indicates a moderate level of satisfaction with these practices. The highest-rated item, with a mean score of 3.2, relates to the provision of constructive feedback to improve performance, suggesting a slightly more positive perception that may contribute to teachers' development. Conversely, the least positively perceived area, scoring 2.9, pertains to fairness and transparency in performance appraisals, indicating a need for improvement in this aspect of HRM practices. Transparency and fairness in evaluations are crucial for maintaining trust and motivation among staff. Notably, there is a substantial spread in responses, with standard deviations ranging from 1.0 to 1.2. This variation indicates diverse perspectives among teachers, influenced by different experiences or interpretations of these HRM practices.

3.2. EFL teachers' recommendations on HRM practices and policies

To uncover recommendations for enhancing HRM practices in rural areas, we analyzed feedback from the questionnaire, focusing on less positive responses within each theme. This led to the creation of

Table 4. Professional development.

Statements	Mean	Std. deviation
The HRM policies in my rural school support my growth as an EFL teacher.	3.0	1.0
The HRM practices at my rural school enhance my skills as an EFL teacher.	3.1	1.1
The HRM practices in my rural school provide adequate opportunities for career progression in EFL teaching.	3.2	1.2
The HRM policies in my rural school support continuous learning and development in EFL teaching.	3.0	0.9
The HRM practices at my rural school help me adapt to changes in EFL teaching methods or curriculum.	2.9	1.1
Average mean	3.04	

Table 5. Motivation.

Statements	Mean	Std. deviation
The HRM practices at my rural school motivate me to improve my EFL teaching.	3.1	1.1
I feel more motivated to teach EFL when my work is recognized and appreciated.	3.4	1.2
The HRM practices at my rural school promote a sense of professional fulfillment in my EFL teaching.	3.0	1.0
The HRM policies in my rural school support a balance between my EFL teaching duties and personal life.	2.9	1.2
The HRM practices in my rural school encourage creativity and innovation in EFL teaching.	3.2	1.1
Average	3.12	

Table 6. Performance recognition.

Statements	Mean	Std. deviation
I feel the HRM practices in my school recognize and reward my performance fairly.	3.0	1.0
I feel that exceptional teaching performance is appropriately rewarded.	3.1	1.1
The HRM practices in my school provide me with constructive feedback to improve my performance.	3.2	1.2
The HRM practices in my school ensure fairness and transparency in performance appraisals.	2.9	1.1
Average mean	3.05	

Table 7. Summary of recommendations from EFL teacher related job satisfaction.

Q1: What specific elements of the current grievance redressal mechanism do you think need improvement?

Theme	Point of recommendation	Quotation
Job satisfaction	Efficiency	T1: 'I believe there is a need for a more effective system that ensures prompt response and resolution to our issues'. T6: 'I think an improvement in response time and resolution effectiveness is essential to better serve our needs'.
	Confidentiality	T2: 'We need an anonymous reporting system that will allow us to raise grievances without fear of retribution'.
	Transparency	T3: 'This could be improved by implementing a tracking mechanism and regular updates on the progress'.
	Personalization	T4: 'We need a mechanism that is more sensitive and responsive to our specific contexts'.
	Accessibility	T5: 'The mechanism needs to be made more accessible, perhaps by offering digital platforms or mobile services'.
	Decentralization	T7: 'There needs to be some level of decentralization that would allow for quicker and more localized resolutions'.

interview questions for rural EFL teachers to gather their ideas for improvement. We have tabulated the interview results and provided explanations for ease of understanding.

Upon examining EFL teachers' responses in rural areas, recommendations to bolster job satisfaction emerge. Addressing the inefficiency of the grievance redressal process is a prevalent concern, with T1 suggesting a more effective system for a prompt response and resolution. T6 emphasizes the need for improvement in response time and resolution effectiveness. T2 advocates for an anonymous reporting system to raise grievances without fear of retribution. T3 recommends implementing a tracking mechanism and providing regular updates on progress for increased transparency. T4 highlights the need for a mechanism that is more sensitive and responsive to specific contexts. T5 proposes making the mechanism more accessible, possibly by offering digital platforms or mobile services. Finally, T7 suggests some level of decentralization for quicker and more localized resolutions. These direct recommendations, when incorporated into existing HRM practices, hold significant promise for enhancing job satisfaction among rural EFL teachers, paving the way for a more effective and responsive work environment (Table 7).

Based on the summary of responses from EFL teachers regarding professional development, numerous recommendations emerge. T1 underscores the need for locally accessible professional development training. T2 points out the limitations in internet connectivity in their areas and suggests providing off-line digital resources and tools to aid them in adapting to new methodologies. T3 emphasizes the importance of creating clear, localized guides in response to curriculum changes. T4 proposes in-person mentorship or coaching from experienced educators, providing personalized support for these teachers. T5 suggests providing additional educational materials linked to further education opportunities. T6 highlights the value of regular in-person meetings with fellow rural EFL teachers as a platform for knowledge and idea exchange. Lastly, T7 proposes providing comprehensive teaching materials tailored to their rural context. If these recommendations are integrated into the existing professional development programs, they promise significant enhancements in the professional growth of rural EFL teachers, fostering a more adaptive and responsive teaching environment (Table 8).

Upon analyzing the responses from EFL teachers regarding motivation (refer to Table 9), various recommendations have surfaced. T1 suggests introducing flexible scheduling in HRM policies to assist in balancing personal commitments with professional duties. T2 stresses the necessity for a clear policy on leave for personal matters, allowing teachers to take time off when needed without compromising

Table 8. Summary of recommendations from EFL teacher related to professional development.

Q2: What specific support or resources do you believe would assist you in adapting more effectively to changes in EFL teaching methods or curriculum?

Theme	Point of recommendation	Quotation
Professional development	Local accessibility	T1: 'Considering our rural setting, having access to professional development training locally would be incredibly beneficial'.
	Offline digital resources	T2: 'Given our limited internet connectivity, providing us with offline digital resources and tools would help us adapt to new EFL teaching methodologies'.
	Localized guides	T3: 'Creating clear, localized guides whenever there are changes in the curriculum would be beneficial'.
	Personalized support	T4: 'In-person mentorship or coaching from experienced educators who understand our context would be a great help'.
	Additional educational materials	T5: 'Considering our rural context and the limited resources available, providing us with additional educational materials linked to further education opportunities would be very beneficial'.
	Regular meetings	T6: 'Regular in-person meetings with fellow rural EFL teachers would be beneficial'.
	Comprehensive teaching materials	T7: 'Considering our limited access to resources, providing us with comprehensive teaching materials would be greatly helpful'.

Table 9. Summary of recommendations from EFL teacher related to motivation.

Q3: Can you recommend some changes in HRM policies that could better support a balance between your EFL teaching duties and personal life?

Theme	Point of recommendation	Quotation
Motivation	Flexible scheduling	T1: '[...] HRM policies could allow for some level of flexibility in teaching hours, it would greatly assist in managing personal commitments alongside our professional duties'.
	Clear policy on leave	T2: '[...] We need a system that allows us to take time off, when necessary, without compromising our professional responsibilities'.
	Housing assistance or support	T3: 'Implementing housing assistance or support in HRM policies could greatly enhance our work-life balance'.
		T4: 'A housing allowance or support for teachers could greatly assist in creating a work-life balance'.
	Professional development within working hours	T5: 'Changes in HRM policies to include professional development as part of our working hours'.
	Hardship allowances or benefits	T6: 'The introduction of hardship allowances or benefits would be beneficial. Such a policy would help us to better manage the personal challenges associated with working in a rural area'.
	Manageable workload	T7: 'HRM policies should ensure that our workload is manageable and realistic'.

professional responsibilities. Both T3 and T4 advocate for housing assistance or support in HRM policies, with T3 stating that it could greatly improve work-life balance and T4 asserting that a housing allowance or support would contribute to a better work-life balance. T5 proposes including professional development as part of working hours through changes in HRM policies. T6 addresses the challenges of teaching in rural areas, suggesting the introduction of hardship allowances or benefits to better manage personal challenges. Lastly, T7 calls for a reassessment of workload to ensure it is manageable and realistic. If these recommendations become integral to HRM practices, they have the potential to significantly enhance motivation among rural EFL teachers, fostering a more supportive and balanced working environment.

Upon examining the responses from EFL teachers about performance recognition (see Table 10), various recommendations emerge. T1 underscores the importance of establishing a clear and comprehensive criteria for performance appraisal, suggesting that the criteria should be disclosed in advance and encompass various aspects of teaching, not solely test scores. T2 advocates for more continuous engagement, proposing regular feedback sessions throughout the academic year, not just at its conclusion. T3 introduces a collective evaluation dimension, suggesting that involving multiple evaluators in the appraisal process could ensure fairness and minimize bias. Similarly, T4 recommends incorporating a

Table 10. Summary of recommendations from EFL teacher related to performance recognition.

Q4: What changes would you recommend to the current HRM practices to ensure fairness and transparency in performance appraisals?

Theme	Point of recommendation	Quotation
Performance recognition	Clear and comprehensive appraisal criteria	T1: 'A clear and comprehensive criteria for performance appraisal ... should be made known to all teachers ahead of time and should focus on various aspects of teaching, not just test scores'.
	Regular feedback sessions	T2: 'The performance appraisal process should involve regular feedback sessions'.
	Multiple evaluators	T3: 'Involving multiple evaluators in the appraisal process could help to ensure fairness'.
	Self-evaluation	T4: 'A self-evaluation component as part of the performance appraisal process'.
	Opportunity for teachers to respond to appraisals	T5: 'Providing teachers with the opportunity to discuss and respond to their appraisal results can promote transparency and fairness'.
	Consideration of rural context	T6: 'HRM practices should consider the unique context and challenges of teaching in a rural area when appraising performance'.
	Record keeping of appraisals	T7: 'Maintaining records of appraisals'.

self-evaluation component in the performance appraisal process, allowing teachers to reflect on their performance and provide an additional perspective. T5 promotes active teacher involvement in the evaluation process, stressing that allowing teachers to discuss and respond to their appraisal results can foster transparency and fairness. T6 calls for a contextual understanding, asserting that HRM practices should consider the unique context and challenges of teaching in a rural area during performance appraisal. Lastly, T7 suggests maintaining accessible records of appraisals for a longitudinal understanding of performance. If these recommendations are integrated into HRM practices, they have the potential to significantly enhance performance recognition among rural EFL teachers, contributing to a more nuanced and fair evaluation process.

4. Discussions

The primary objective of this research is to thoroughly explore how EFL teachers in rural areas perceive current HRM practices. Furthermore, this study also seeks to investigate and analyze the recommendations offered by these teachers for the enhancement of HRM practices. The findings derived from the questionnaire depict a generally neutral perception of HRM practices among rural EFL teachers. This neutral stance extends across various dimensions of HRM including job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and performance recognition. Complementing this data, insights from teacher interviews offer valuable suggestions for refining HRM practices, reinforcing the credibility of the observations.

In the realm of job satisfaction, our findings indicate that rural EFL teachers showed a neutral standpoint, offering an opportunity for HRM to enhance the work environment. This neutrality, as per Herzberg's two-factor theory, may not imply dissatisfaction but rather an absence of factors that significantly enhance satisfaction (Singh & Bhattacharjee, 2020). This theory suggests that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are influenced by different sets of factors: motivators like recognition and achievement lead to satisfaction, while hygiene factors like policy and administration prevent dissatisfaction. The teachers' emphasis on an effective grievance redressal mechanism aligns with the need for robust hygiene factors. In line with this, the recommendations as emerged in the interview session for a more prompt, confidential and transparent system for addressing grievances reflect a desire for efficient resolutions and a secure environment for raising concerns. The call for transparency, including regular updates on grievance progress, speaks to the need for empathy in HRM practices, resonating with the motivational aspects of Herzberg's theory (Basnyat & Clarence Lao, 2020; Sasere & Makhasane, 2023; Singh & Bhattacharjee, 2020). By adopting these changes, HRM could positively influence teachers' perceptions, improving the job satisfaction landscape and effectively addressing the nuanced concerns highlighted in their responses (Raja et al., 2023; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2020).

While HRM practices have the opportunity to enhance job satisfaction through addressing grievances and improving transparency, another critical area emerges: the professional development of rural EFL teachers. Our findings indicate a noticeable dissatisfaction among these teachers, particularly regarding the support for teaching methodologies and curriculum changes. This dissatisfaction points to a potential misalignment between HRM practices and the evolving needs of teachers in the dynamic educational landscape. In response, rural EFL teachers advocate for localized training resources, acknowledging the unique language and cultural contexts of rural areas. They also suggest using offline digital tools to overcome technological constraints. Furthermore, the emphasis on mentorship programs and in-person networking opportunities highlights the significance of building a supportive professional community. In line with this, Tuytens et al. (2023) claim that by integrating the teacher-driven recommendations, HRM has the opportunity to tailor its professional development initiatives more closely to the specific needs and challenges faced by rural EFL teachers, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of such support programs. Furthermore, Fan et al. (2023) and Hufnagel and Spraul (2023) postulate that aligning HRM practices with the actual needs of teachers has the potential to transform professional development into a more impactful and meaningful facet of their careers. The incorporation of localized resources and mentorship programs addresses the expressed dissatisfaction, promoting a sense of community and shared learning among teachers (Sandwick et al., 2019; Squires, 2019). This strategic alignment not only enhances the effectiveness of HRM practices but also contributes to the overall professional growth and satisfaction of rural EFL teachers, fostering a more supportive and dynamic educational environment.

Beyond addressing professional development concerns, our research further explores the broader implications of HRM practices, particularly their nuanced impact on rural EFL teachers' motivation and satisfaction. This exploration reveals a complex interplay between institutional policies and individual teacher needs, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of this relationship. This aligns with Herzberg's two-factor theory, emphasizing the importance of recognizing teacher efforts as key motivators enhancing job satisfaction (Singh & Bhattacharjee, 2020). Additionally, the need for better work-life balance and support measures like housing assistance can be viewed through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which posits that basic needs such as safety and security must be met before individuals can pursue higher-level motivators like esteem and self-actualization (Navy, 2020). Teachers' suggestions for policy improvements, including flexible scheduling and clear personal leave policies, resonate with this concept, as these changes can help fulfill their fundamental needs, thereby fostering a more conducive environment for professional growth and satisfaction. Moreover, these recommendations, like integrating professional development and realistic workload reassessment, aim to create a supportive, balanced work environment, addressing the unique challenges of rural teaching and aligning with contemporary HRM practices (Garone et al., 2022; Lagaía et al., 2023).

In addition to broader considerations of motivation and satisfaction, our findings delve into the specific aspect of performance recognition within HRM practices. Teachers exhibit a neutral stance towards these practices, with a moderate level of satisfaction, highlighting nuanced challenges and potential areas for improvement in evaluation methods. This neutral stance reflects the mixed responses often seen in educational settings, influenced by unique challenges like limited resources. However, there is a noted need for improvement in the fairness and transparency of performance appraisals, echoing the significance of trust and motivation in teacher evaluations. The varied responses among teachers, indicative of diverse experiences and interpretations, highlight the complex nature of implementing HRM practices in educational contexts, which might be influenced by factors such as school culture and community dynamics (Karatas-Ozkan et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2022). This complexity suggests that while HRM practices have potential benefits, their effectiveness is heavily contingent on contextual factors and individual teacher experiences (Kravarići et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2023). In line with this, the recommendations that emerged from the interviews with the teachers include creating clear criteria for performance reviews, holding frequent feedback sessions, using multiple evaluators to ensure fairness, incorporating self-reviews for additional insight, involving teachers in the review process for greater transparency, acknowledging the challenges of rural teaching and maintaining detailed records of reviews for a better understanding over time.

In essence, our study reveals significant implications. The teachers display a neutral stance towards all aspects of HRM, indicating a potential for HRM to enhance the work environment. According to Herzberg's two-factor theory, this neutrality suggests a lack of satisfaction-enhancing factors rather than outright dissatisfaction (Bhatt et al., 2022). Practically, HRM can improve job satisfaction by focusing on motivators like recognition and achievement and strengthening hygiene factors such as policy and administration. A key aspect is the teachers' call for an effective, confidential and transparent grievance redressal system. Theoretically, this reflects Herzberg's concept that job satisfaction is influenced by distinct motivational and hygiene factors (Singh & Bhattacharjee, 2020). Additionally, our findings highlight the critical need for professional development of rural EFL teachers, pointing to dissatisfaction with support in teaching methodologies and curriculum changes. This indicates a misalignment between current HRM practices and teachers' evolving needs. Teachers advocate for localized training, offline digital tools, mentorship and networking, suggesting HRM should customize professional development to their unique contexts. This aligns with the theory that professional development, tailored to teachers' actual needs, can significantly impact their careers (Hennessy et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022). Such strategic alignment enhances HRM effectiveness and contributes to the professional growth and satisfaction of rural EFL teachers, advocating for a modern HRM approach that personalizes professional development to meet specific challenges and needs.

While the findings of our study are significant, it is important to note its limitations. The interview component involved only seven teachers from a single area, which might not represent the broad range of views among rural EFL teachers. To gain a fuller picture, future studies should include a wider variety of educators from different regions and with varied teaching backgrounds. Also, incorporating factors such as teaching experience, personal background and available school resources could yield a more detailed understanding of what influences teachers' perspectives in rural areas. By addressing these gaps, future research can better refine and adapt HRM strategies to meet the specific needs of EFL teachers in rural environments

5. Conclusions

The primary aim of this research was to examine how EFL teachers in rural areas perceive and experience the impact of current HRM practices, and to gather their recommendations for improving these practices. The study uncovers crucial insights, dividing its findings into two main parts in alignment with its research questions. Firstly, the research revealed a generally neutral perception of HRM practices among rural EFL teachers across various dimensions such as job satisfaction, professional development, motivation and performance recognition. This neutrality, explained through Herzberg's two-factor theory, suggests not so much dissatisfaction but rather an absence of factors significantly enhancing satisfaction. The emphasis on an effective grievance redressal mechanism and the call for transparency in HRM practices reflect a need for empathy and efficiency in resolving issues. By adopting changes such as a more prompt, confidential and transparent system for addressing grievances, HRM could positively influence teachers' perceptions, improving job satisfaction and effectively addressing their nuanced concerns. Secondly, the study identified a critical need for the professional development of rural EFL teachers, noting dissatisfaction with support in teaching methodologies and curriculum changes. Teachers recommended localized training resources, the use of offline digital tools, mentorship programs and in-person networking opportunities. These suggestions point to a misalignment between current HRM practices and the evolving needs of teachers in the educational landscape. By integrating these teacher-driven recommendations, HRM has the opportunity to tailor its initiatives more closely to the specific needs of rural EFL teachers, enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of support programs.

The broader implications of these findings indicate a complex interplay between institutional policies and individual teacher needs. Aligning HRM practices with the actual needs of teachers has the potential to transform professional development into a more impactful and meaningful aspect of their careers. Additionally, the exploration into the nuances of motivation and satisfaction, viewed through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, emphasizes the importance of fulfilling basic needs for security and safety to foster a conducive environment for professional growth. Despite its significant insights, the study has limitations. The interview component's limited scope, involving only a small number of teachers from a

single area, might not fully represent the diversity of perspectives among rural EFL teachers. Future research should include a more varied group of educators from different regions and with diverse backgrounds. Additionally, considering factors like teaching experience, personal background and available resources could provide a more comprehensive understanding of influences on teachers' perspectives in rural areas. Addressing these gaps can help refine HRM strategies to better meet the specific needs of EFL teachers in rural environments. In a nutshell, this study sheds light on the perception and experience of rural EFL teachers regarding HRM practices and offers valuable recommendations for tailoring these practices. The implications of these findings are profound, suggesting a pathway for HRM to enhance job satisfaction and professional development by addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by teachers in rural settings.

11 Disclosure statement

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PÁGINA 3

PÁGINA 4

PÁGINA 5

PÁGINA 6

PÁGINA 7

PÁGINA 8

PÁGINA 9

PÁGINA 10

PÁGINA 11

PÁGINA 12

PÁGINA 13

PÁGINA 14

PÁGINA 15

PÁGINA 16
