Educational Environment and the Quality of Foreign Language Teaching: Perspectives of Kazakhstani Urban and Rural EFL Teachers

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Abstract

The disparity in the quality of foreign language education between urban and rural secondary schools in Kazakhstan has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Despite the national goal of achieving B2-level proficiency, students in rural areas often encounter obstacles that impede their language learning progress. These challenges stem from factors such as limited access to qualified teachers, inadequate resources, socioeconomic disadvantages, and geographic isolation. Although previous researchers have recognized these factors, there remains a gap in understanding the perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers regarding the quality of language education. To fill this gap, this study's authors aim to explore the perspectives of EFL teachers in both urban and rural schools. Employing a mixed-method research design, the researchers integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches through surveys and semi-structured interviews. They administer a quantitative survey online with 524 participants, comprising 313 urban teachers and 211 rural teachers. Additionally, they conduct 20 individual semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers from secondary schools in Kazakhstan. The authors investigate six key components of the language educational environment that influence EFL teaching quality: 1) linguistic (teachers' language proficiency), 2) sociopsychological (teacher–student interaction), 3) methodical (teachers' professional development), 4) information and communication (ICT knowledge), 5) intercultural (teachers' intercultural competence), and 6) managerial (teachers' involvement in school administration). By conducting qualitative analysis of interviews and quantitative analysis of survey data, the researchers elaborate on characteristics of these components of the educational environment that may underlie the observed disparities in language learning outcomes.

Keywords: educational environment, English as a foreign language teacher, foreign language education, quality, rural school, secondary school, urban school

1. Introduction

According to the concept of foreign language (FL) education in Kazakhstan, school leavers are expected to achieve a B2-level of English language proficiency on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). However, the current level of English proficiency among secondary school students, particularly those in rural areas, does not meet this requirement. Educators recognize that by the end of secondary school, the English proficiency levels of students in Kazakhstan vary from A in rural schools to B2 or C1 in urban schools (British Council, 2022).

The disparity in the quality of educational provisions and academic achievements in urban and rural secondary schools in Kazakhstan has been a focus of many international and domestic scholars. Researchers have conducted a large number of studies to identify the factors influencing this gap. Some studies have revealed that rural schools tend to suffer from a lack of well-qualified teachers and limited access to high-quality instruction (Bridges & Sagintayeva, 2014; Vasic et al., 2020). Other factors include geographic isolation and insufficient social and cultural infrastructure (Umbetalieva et al., 2016), poor performance of rural students (Chankseliani et al., 2020), poorly resourced schooling (Jumabayeva, 2016), computer shortages and limited access to the internet (Bokayev, 2016), and overall socioeconomic disadvantages (OECD, 2019a). Moreover, there is a contrast in the number of competent teachers between rural and urban schools, with rural areas having three times fewer competent teachers than urban areas. Additionally, rural areas have a higher prevalence of teachers with lower qualification categories (Vasic et al., 2020).

Despite research on the disparity in the quality of education in urban and rural schools and on teachers' professional development, Kazakhstan remains underresearched in terms of EFL teachers' conceptions of the quality of English language education in urban and rural areas. By exploring both urban and rural participants' perspectives on teaching English in secondary schools in Kazakhstan, this study's authors aimed to identify factors that may lead to disparities in the quality of FL education by outlining a model of a favorable language educational environment. Bernard (2012) underscored that the creation and maintenance of educational environments that

enable students to learn are essential to the quality of the outcome:

> The design and management of learning spaces is fundamental to the achievement of positive learning outcomes as well as to the health and well-being of learners. Simply put, good learning environments foster quality learning, and bad learning environments do not. (p. 9)

Thus, investigating EFL teachers' perspectives on the language educational environment of their classrooms and schools, as well as identifying disparities in these perspectives between urban and rural teachers, will help to clarify whether any specific characteristics of the language educational environment exist in relation to the school location, whether urban or rural. This study contributes to the understanding of the reasons for the disparity in the quality of secondary FL education in Kazakhstan. The researchers thus aim to offer a model of a favorable educational environment that will improve language learning outcomes and enhance the quality of FL teaching.

The following research questions are central to the empirical section:

1. What are the constituent parts of the favorable language educational environment model?

2. To what extent are these components present in rural and urban secondary schools?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Quality of FL Teaching

Researchers recognize quality as a contested concept in international research literature (Ankomah et al., 2005). Its elusive nature means no agreed-upon formal definition exists (White, 1998). It includes curriculum design, specification of learning outcomes (Crabbe, 2003), teaching effectiveness, assessment practices, and more general aspects such as students' emotional well-being and the educational standards of the school (British Council, 2022).

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2000) elaborated a set of indicators for evaluating the overall quality of language teaching programs. These indicators include program structure, administration, and planning; curriculum; instruction; intake and orientation; retention and transition; assessment and learner gains; and professional development and staff evaluation.

Important for FL teaching is the CEFR framework, which establishes the target levels of language proficiency and allows for comparing students' achievements at these levels "in different learning environments and for different languages," thus helping schools structure their curricula more coherently (Heyworth, 2013, p. 297). The introduction of the CEFR to FL education in Kazakhstan ensured the adoption of international standards that helped to improve the quality of teaching and learning, the language curriculum, and teaching materials, thus making the educational system of the country more competitive at the global level.

Bos et al. (2012) distinguished five principles that guide quality teaching: maintaining academic rigor, fostering high expectations, facilitating meaningful interactions, sustaining a focus on language, and developing a comprehensive curriculum. Li (2020) elaborated a system of indicators to evaluate the quality of FL teaching. One of the key indicators in this system is teachers' "ability to carry out FL teaching," which includes setting accurate teaching goals; applying intelligent teaching tools, advanced teaching methods, and diverse teaching forms; developing rich teaching content; providing comprehensive teaching assessment; and creating the overall atmosphere and environment of classroom teaching (p. 136).

Quality is equally important for all stakeholders involved in the educational process. For teachers, in particular, quality education is not only a professional responsibility but also an issue of professional achievement and fulfilment (Crabbe, 2003). Consequently, numerous researchers have focused on language teaching effectiveness as one of the key factors of quality FL education, underscoring the significant role teachers play in forming their students' learning experiences and the outcomes of language curricula.

Generally, teaching effectiveness refers to achieving educational goals and desired outcomes. Walqui and van Lier (2010) argued that effective teaching embraces a wide range of methods and approaches "that can address students' needs with excellence" (p. 81). To achieve goals and respond to students' immediate needs, teachers should have a high level of language awareness and proficiency to provide comprehensive input for learners, which is essential for successful instructed language learning (Ellis, 2005). Authors of extensive research distinguish professional skills and the characteristics of effective teachers, which include pedagogical content knowledge (Grieser & Hendricks, 2018), teaching experience (Harris & Sass, 2011), and assessment literacy (Giraldo, 2021). Further, numerous studies have revealed that teachers' personalities may significantly influence students' academic performance and enhance the quality of FL learning. The personal attributes of an effective teacher include will and enthusiasm (Clarke, 1994), warmth and kindness (Feldman, 1986), and fairness and justice (Korkmaz & Yavuz, 2011).

A number of scholars emphasize that FL teachers should be able to create a comfortable language educational environment where learners feel relaxed and motivated (Chen & Lin, 2009; Cheung, 2006). A comfortable language learning environment enhances learners' willingness to participate actively in class and encourages them to experiment with FL and communicate without fear of judgment or criticism.

Thus, effective language teaching involves not only developing students' language knowledge and skills but also creating a conducive language educational environment that encourages students to learn and grow.

2.2 Language Educational Environment and EFL Teachers

The concept of a language educational environment is essential for FL education. Despite its acknowledged significance, the term remains broad and multifaceted, reflecting multiple factors and conditions.

Schmuck and Schmuck (1978) proposed one of the earliest definitions of the educational environment. The researchers defined it as the overall teacher–student and student–student interactions in the classroom and distinguished its key elements such as the quality of interpersonal relations, the emotional and structural aspects of teaching strategies and classroom organization, teacher expectations of students, the extent of teacher control over classroom activities, classroom discipline management, and learners' demographic characteristics such as gender and age. Huttunen (1996) referred to the concept of the educational environment as "the physical, mental, and social conditions at the learners' disposal" (p. 4). Physical conditions refer to the surroundings within the learning space that directly affect the learners' physical comfort and well-being. Mental conditions refer to the cognitive processes and mental attitudes of both learners and teachers, including factors such as the focus of attention, nature of interaction, and opportunities for practice within the learning context. Social conditions refer to the roles and interactions of both students and teachers in an educational setting. Bernard's (2012) description of the educational environment underscores the interconnection of physical, social, and pedagogical factors in developing learning experiences. By addressing these factors holistically, teachers can create a supportive and conducive learning environment that fosters student academic performance and well-being.

The present study's authors proposed and employed a model of the language educational environment as a complex componential system that helps to obtain deeper insights into EFL teachers' perspectives on the quality of English language education in urban and rural schools in Kazakhstan. The model consisted of six key components reflecting various aspects of teaching and working at schools, the complexity of which can provide a holistic understanding of the quality of the language educational environment. These components are 1) linguistic, 2) sociopsychological, 3) methodical, 4) information and communication, 5) intercultural, and 6) managerial.

2.2.1 Linguistic Component

The linguistic component of the model recognizes the importance of teachers' self-development of their FL skills. Teachers' command of the target language directly influences their ability to create an immersive and favorable language environment, effectively communicate language nuances, and instill confidence in students. Without a high level of FL proficiency, teachers rely more heavily on instructional resources and cannot fully engage in spontaneous interactions in the FL with their students (Medgyes, 2001). Further, the level of FL proficiency determines the extent to which teachers use the target language in the classroom. A higher level of FL competence allows for the use of a wider range of teaching methods (Berry, 1990), which is essential for qualitative teaching. Thus, the linguistic component of the model presupposes the critical importance for FL teachers to increase their language awareness and enhance their target language skills.

2.2.2 Sociopsychological Component

The sociopsychological component of the model recognizes the importance of harmonious and collaborative teacher–student and student–student interactions. Bardach et al. (2022) referred to the psychological characteristics of a teacher as a set of motivations, emotions, self-regulation patterns, and personality traits. These can include

> the beliefs teachers have about their own capabilities as teachers or to their goals for teaching (motivation), how they feel about their students or their subject (emotions), how they regulate their emotions (self-regulation), or whether they are outgoing or shy (personality) (Bardach et al., 2022, p. 261).

Frenzel et al. (2009) emphasized that specific psychological characteristics help teachers provide high-quality instruction, which results in increased motivation, performance, and achievement. Teachers who demonstrate encouragement, kindness, warmth, and an interest in their students' achievements instill a sense of trust and confidence, which can enhance students' engagement and willingness in FL acquisition. Effective communication, empathy, and mutual understanding between teachers and students are essential for creating a positive and supportive learning environment.

2.2.3 Methodical Component

The methodical component of the model underscores the importance of continuous EFL teachers' professional development to provide effective teaching. Teachers should regularly update their knowledge of teaching methodologies and stay informed about the latest developments and best practices in FL education. As Guskey (2000) highlighted, "High-quality professional development is at the center of every modern proposal to enhance education. Regardless of how schools are formed or reformed, structured or restructured, the renewal of staff members' professional skills is considered fundamental to improvement" (p. 16). Teachers should be equipped with pedagogical tools to motivate students to learn an FL and its culture, to broaden their linguistic knowledge, and to enhance their intercultural communication skills. Ongoing development should be a part of teachers' professional development. Gebhard (2006) emphasized that even if the most qualified and experienced teachers can learn new things about language use and teaching methods, they should constantly reflect on their teaching and its consequences for students, particularly in relation to creating a learner-centered favorable language educational environment that engages students in learning about the FL and its culture.

2.2.4 Information and Communication Component

The information and communication component recognizes the importance of EFL teachers' ICT knowledge and skills for effective FL teaching. As the world becomes more technologically advanced, teachers should have sufficient knowledge and skills to make use of various technologies. The integration of digital technologies and digital learning content can significantly enhance the quality of FL education. In the modern information age, EFL teachers must remain aware of various opportunities offered by smart applications, tools, and social media to create an engaging and motivating language educational environment. Cakici (2016) underscored that students feel highly motivated to learn a language because they use computers and learn in a stress-free learning environment. The ICT competences of EFL teachers are essential for delivering high-quality language instruction. These competences include digital literacy (Kahveci, 2021), technological pedagogical content knowledge (Harris et al., 2009), multimedia integration (Suman, 2023), digital resource curation (Deschaine & Sharm, 2015), adaptability, and continued learning (Mardiana, 2020).

2.2.5 Intercultural Component

The intercultural component of the model implies the development of EFL teachers' intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence. The shift from a focus on linguistic tasks to the development of intercultural competence requires EFL teachers to adapt their teaching approaches and incorporate an intercultural perspective into their teaching practices. This will be possible if teachers have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make their students intercultural speakers. In terms of knowledge, as emphasized by Sercu (2006), EFL teachers should have a deep understanding of both the target culture and students' own culture to be able to explain similarities and differences between these cultures to their students. They should also be aware of the cultural stereotypes students may hold and employ various approaches to address these stereotypes in FL classrooms. With respect to skills, teachers should be able to compare cultures, emphasize nuances and unique features of these cultures, and transmit cultural knowledge to students effectively. They should also be able to select appropriate teaching materials, analyze them for the intercultural component, and adjust them if they require a more intercultural focus. In terms of attitudes, teachers should demonstrate "tolerance of ambiguity, cognitive and behavioral flexibility, patience, enthusiasm, commitment [to] interpersonal skills, openness to new experiences and people, empathy, respect, sense of humor or ethical behaviour" (Paige, 1996, p. 155).

2.2.6 Managerial Component

The managerial component of the model recognizes the significant role that teachers have in the administrative life of their educational institutions. Because teachers are directly involved not only in the educational process but also in the processes related to school administration and management, they often have their own understanding of how to develop and improve the organizational structures and procedures within their schools. Teachers' perspectives are important for effective decision-making and creating a positive school environment. Further, teachers work in close liaison with the school administrative staff, students, and parents, bridging communication among them and ensuring that all stakeholders remain well informed. Encouraging teachers to participate in administrative discussions and decision-making tends to create a more qualified educational environment and thus increase the overall quality of education (Eriş et al., 2017; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2011).

Thus, the proposed model of language educational environment emphasizes the multifaceted roles that EFL teachers play in fostering effective FL learning. This model provides a framework for creating a favorable language educational environment in which EFL teachers play a central role in maintaining a conducive atmosphere that enables learners to achieve academic success.

3. Methodology

This study's authors employed a mixed-method research design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches through surveys and semi-structured interviews. The survey included multiple-choice, open-ended, and closed-ended questions. To gather more comprehensive data, the researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers from secondary schools located in the Akmola, Kyzylorda, Pavlodar, and Kostanay regions of Kazakhstan. They developed a set of open-ended interview questions for each component of the proposed model of the language educational environment. The questions helped the researchers to generate detailed, descriptive data about the quality of FL education in urban and rural schools of the country from the perspectives of EFL teachers. The participants were free to choose either Kazakh or Russian as the language for their interviews, according to their preferences, and each interview lasted approximately 1 hour.

3.1 Participants

The researchers conducted the quantitative survey online with 524 participants, including 313 urban teachers and 211 rural teachers from the aforementioned regions of Kazakhstan. The survey included multiple-choice and closed-ended questions. Table 1 summarizes the survey participants' profiles.

Table 1. Profiles of Survey Participants

	Urban EFL Teachers		Rural EFL Teachers	
	N=313		N=211	
	Age			
	N	%	N	%
20–29 y.o.	64	20.45	48	22.75
30–39 y.o.	139	44.41	115	54.5
40–49 y.o.	74	23.64	45	21.33
50 and above	36	11.5	29	13.74
	Gender			
Female teachers	298	97.3	202	95.7
Male teachers	15	2.7	9	4.3
	Years of teaching experience			
0–4 years	62	19.81	47	22.27
5–9 years	61	19.48	57	27.01
10–20 years	119	38.01	70	33.18
20 years and above	71	22.7	37	17.54
	Qualification			
Teacher	78	24.92	60	28.44
Teacher-moderator	96	30.67	63	29.85
Teacher-expert	74	23.65	52	24.65
Teacher-researcher	55	17.57	34	16.11
Teacher-master	10	3.19	2	0.95
	Educational background			
Higher education institution	301	96	198	94
College	12	4	13	6

For the semi-structured interviews, the researchers invited 20 EFL teachers, comprising 10 from urban schools and 10 from rural schools. They chose the interviewees on the basis of their willingness to participate in the interview. During the survey stage, the researchers encouraged participants who were interested in providing further insights to share their contact details via the online form. Table 2 presents an overview of the interviewees' profiles.

Table 2. Interviewee Profiles

Pseudonyms	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Teaching Category	Location Urban/Rural
RT1	f	12 years	Moderator	Rural
RT2	m	6 years	Moderator	Rural
RT3	m	17 years	Expert	Rural
RT4	f	23 years	Master	Rural
RT5	f	2 years	Teacher	Rural
RT6	f	2 years	Teacher	Rural
RT7	f	2 years	Teacher	Rural
RT8	f	4 years	Moderator	Rural
RT9	m	3 years	Teacher	Rural
RT10	f	10 years	Expert	Rural
UT1	f	14 years	Expert	Urban
UT2	f	7 years	Moderator	Urban
UT3	f	20 years	Researcher	Urban
UT4	f	8 years	Expert	Urban
UT5	f	41 years	Researcher	Urban
UT6	f	5 years	Moderator	Urban
UT7	f	5 years	Moderator	Urban
UT8	f	25 years	Expert	Urban
UT9	f	12 years	Researcher	Urban
UT10	f	16 years	Expert	Urban

3.2 Validity of the Instruments

The researchers evaluated the validity of the instruments by consulting two experts in key areas of the research (FL education and schoolteacher education). The experts provided their feedback on the clarity and relevance of the items included in the questionnaire and interview. Subsequently, the researchers refined the instruments according to the experts' recommendations.

3.3 Questionnaire Reliability

To assess the internal consistency, the researchers calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha values for all the questionnaire categories are above 0.7 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reliability of the Questionnaire

Categories	Number of Items	Items Deleted	Alpha
Linguistic component	6	-	0.73
Sociopsychological component	7	-	0.77
Methodical component	7	-	0.75
Information and communication component	8	-	0.71
Intercultural component	8	-	0.75
Managerial component	8	-	0.73

3.4 Reliability of the Qualitative Results

The authors validated the authenticity of the qualitative results through peer debriefing. The researchers referred to peers who reviewed the EFL teachers' opinions and verified the coding process. Further, they conducted member checking by inviting the interviewees to review the transcripts and, if necessary, to make corrections to their insights.

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the data in three phases. Initially, they collected and analyzed the quantitative survey data to determine the focus of the subsequent interviews. They applied frequency and percentage analyses to the survey responses. Subsequently, they analyzed the data from the interviews to complement the findings obtained from the quantitative analysis. Finally, after the completion of data collection in all the regions, the researchers conducted a comprehensive analysis of both the survey and interview data to provide a more detailed understanding of the research findings. They videotaped and transcribed all interviews. They employed a framework consisting of five stages for coding interview transcripts (Hackett & Strickland, 2019). These stages include familiarization, constructing a thematic framework, indexing and sorting, data summary and display, and mapping and interpretation of the data.

4. Findings

The authors present the study's findings as several themes corresponding to the framework and research questions. First, they analyzed the findings obtained from the questionnaire survey to determine EFL teachers' beliefs and perceptions of a favorable FL educational environment according to the identified components. Second, they supplemented and expanded the questionnaire outcomes by findings from the interviews.

4.1 Linguistic Component

Compared with rural teachers, urban EFL teachers (19%) tend to take English language courses annually (13.4%), which may indicate a slightly greater inclination toward consistent language skill development in urban areas (see Table 4). Further, a lower percentage of urban teachers (8%) had never taken English courses than had rural teachers (16.6%), which may indicate a limited range of language learning opportunities in rural settings.

The most frequently used strategies for enhancing English language proficiency mentioned by both urban and rural EFL teachers were listening to audio/watching movies in English and using online applications. Reading books and articles in English was slightly more common among rural teachers, indicating their inclination toward text-based resources. Participation in English language courses or training was more prevalent among urban teachers, which may be explained by better access to such opportunities in urban areas.

Table 4. Frequency of Taking English Language Courses

		Every Year	Every 3 Years	Every 5 Years	Never
Urban	N	58	160	77	18
EFL teachers	%	18.4	50.8	24.4	5.7
Rural	N	21	90	70	31
EFL teachers	%	9.9	42.5	33	14.7

An interesting finding arose from the analysis of the participants' answers regarding their experiences of interaction with foreign speakers of English (Table 5). In both urban and rural areas, a significant proportion of EFL teachers experienced challenges when communicating with English speakers, with 40.6% and 40.3%, respectively, reporting such difficulties. This indicates a common trend, suggesting that EFL teachers may face similar difficulties in communicating with English speakers. However, there are notable differences in the percentage of teachers who did not experience challenges in communication. In urban areas, 40% of EFL teachers indicated a lack of challenges, whereas in rural settings, this percentage was 28.4%. This discrepancy suggests that rural EFL teachers may have a slightly lower level of proficiency or comfort in communicating with English speakers than their urban counterparts. Moreover, a greater percentage of rural EFL teachers (31.3%) reported never having communicated with English speakers than did urban teachers (19.4%). This may indicate a disparity in opportunities for interaction in urban and rural settings.

Table 5. EFL Teachers' Experience of Interaction With Foreign Speakers of English

		I experience challenges when interacting with foreign speakers of English	I do not experience challenges when communicating with foreign speakers of English	I have never communicated with foreign speakers of English
Urban	N	128	126	61
EFL teachers	%	40.6	40	19.4
Rural EFL teachers	N	86	60	66
	%	40.3	28.4	31.3

Through one of the key questionnaire items, the researchers aimed to identify the perceived needs of EFL teachers for enhancing their English language proficiency within their school settings. They organized the answers to these open-ended questions into six categories, as presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Perceived Needs of EFL Teachers for Enhancing Their English Language Proficiency

		Multimedia language resources	Language seminars, webinars, trainings, Olympiads for EFL teachers	Language courses for teachers	Communication/colla boration with native speakers of English	International internshi ps	Internet access Technological resources
Urban EFL teachers	N	35	32	83	75	28	50
	%	11.1	10,2	26.3	23.8	8.9	15.9
Rural EFL teachers	N	46	5	34	22	2	81
	%	14.6	1,6	10.8	7	0.6	25.7

Overall, the questionnaire findings indicate that urban EFL teachers expressed a greater need for language courses, communication, and collaboration with native speakers of English, and international internships to effectively enhance their FL skills. In contrast, rural teachers acknowledged a greater need for multimedia language resources as well as for technological resources, with many highlighting challenges related to internet access and a lack of opportunity to download various language materials, communicate with international peers, and participate in online language courses.

Four key subthemes emerged during the interview stage: 1) strategies for enhancing English language proficiency, 2) limited opportunities for interacting with native speakers of English, 3) lack of additional resources, and 4) decreased levels of learner motivation.

The interviews revealed that both the urban and rural participants employed several strategies to enhance their English language proficiency, including reading English literature, watching educational videos on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, and attending language courses.

Rural EFL teachers highlighted the lack of opportunities to communicate with native speakers, whom they believed could significantly improve their language proficiency and teaching methods. Further, as emphasized by rural participants, English speaker volunteers could also help them learn more about diverse cultures.

> *RT1: I think that the experience of communicating with native speakers of English is a big advantage. Even when you just talk to them, some kind of inspiration appears, you want to learn more and more. . . . I would like to communicate with a native speaker and test my knowledge, whether or not I can communicate in English in real-life situations.*

> *RT7: It would be great if our school could provide opportunities for teachers and learners to interact with native English speakers. This could enhance not only our English language proficiency but also our understanding of cultural aspects. Perhaps partnerships could be established with those schools at the city level that have international teachers.*

When discussing the disparities in English language proficiency between urban and rural schools, most interviewees pointed to several contributing factors. First, they highlighted the absence of additional resources for English learning in rural areas, such as language centers and private tutors. Additionally, the interviewees emphasized a noticeable decrease in the motivation levels of rural students, which may lead to lower academic achievements.

4.2 Sociopsychological Component

The questionnaire items for the sociopsychological component asked EFL teachers to assess their abilities necessary to build a favorable FL educational environment. The researchers based the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Table 7. EFL Teachers' Self-Assessment of Their Sociopsychological Skills

Item	Urban EFL Teachers		Rural EFL Teachers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
The ability to motivate and manage learners' behavior	3.43	0.66	3.36	0.64
The ability to communicate effectively with learners	3.45	0.71	3.40	0.68
The ability to face and control unexpected situations in the EFL classroom	3.35	0.65	3.34	0.67

The ability to resolve conflicts	3.38	0.65	3.37	0.67
The ability to develop and maintain professional relationships with colleagues	3.58	0.63	3.58	0.62
The ability to make decisions and react to situations quickly and effectively	3.46	0.63	3.43	0.65
The ability to analyze teaching results and make improvements	3.47	0.64	3.48	0.56

There are slight variations in the mean scores between urban and rural teachers in terms of abilities such as motivating and managing learners' behavior and effective communication (see Table 7). Differences in other abilities are relatively minor. These findings suggest that both urban and rural EFL teachers believed that strong sociopsychological skills are necessary for fostering a positive and effective language educational environment.

The researchers identified two key subthemes related to the sociopsychological component during the interviews: 1) teacher–student relations and 2) teacher–parent relations.

The interview findings revealed that both urban and rural EFL teachers employed various strategies to motivate their students to learn English and build effective communication. A common approach was encouraging students to express their ideas openly and creating an environment where students feel comfortable communicating in English without fear of making mistakes. Some urban teachers mentioned the use of social media as a motivational tool, such as, when schools post videos in English created by learners on their Instagram pages. Rural teachers mentioned regular discussions with learners on the importance of knowing FLs, conducting various extracurricular activities, and offering additional resources to read.

Teachers saw communication with parents, partnership and collaboration between home and school as important factors in determining the effectiveness of learning. Both urban and rural teachers acknowledged the significance of maintaining regular communication with parents to ensure learners' academic success. This involves conducting regular meetings with parents to discuss their child's progress, achievements, and any challenges encountered as well as communicating through social messengers.

> UT8: Some parents personally reach out to me, expressing concerns that their children are facing difficulties, especially with homework assignments. Given that not all parents are proficient in English, it is difficult for them to help their children with homework. To address this, I use our parent group platform, where I share audio recordings explaining how to approach homework assignments.

Rural teachers particularly highlighted the advantage of their close-knit communities, where the smaller population size allows for more direct and informal interactions with parents.

> RT5: As we live in a rural area, I have a personal connection with each parent, and we frequently communicate. Whether it is through phone calls or chance encounters on the street, I promptly update them on their child's progress. Additionally, as a subject teacher, I sometimes reach out to parents directly, bypassing the class teacher, since our village is small and everyone is acquainted. During these conversations, I often emphasize the importance of collaborative efforts, asking parents for support. I reassure them that while their child shows promise, a little extra effort is needed. By fostering this partnership with parents, we can achieve greater results together than if I were to work alone.

4.3 Methodical Component

Through the items in this section of the survey, the researchers aimed to identify the frequency of taking professional development courses by urban and rural EFL teachers and whether the participants thought these courses were truly effective in enhancing their teaching.

Table 8. Frequency of Taking Professional Development Courses

		Annually	Every 3 years	Every 5 years	Never
Urban teachers	N	77	149	83	5
	%	24.5	47.5	26.4	1.6
Rural teachers	N	19	69	115	8
	%	9	32.7	54.5	3.8

Urban EFL teachers demonstrated a greater frequency of taking professional development courses annually, with 24.5% of rural EFL teachers participating compared to only 9% of rural EFL teachers (see Table 8). At the same time, the majority of rural teachers (54.5%) reported taking such courses every 5 years. This marked difference in participation rates suggests disparities in access to professional development opportunities in urban and rural areas.

Regarding the effectiveness of professional development courses, among which stand out courses offered by the "Orleu" National Centre for Professional Development and by the Centre of Pedagogical Excellence, the majority of the urban participants (63%) and rural participants (69%) rated them as not fully effective, highlighting that these courses are mainly theoretically based and do not provide opportunities for practical application of new teaching approaches. At the same time, both urban and rural participants reported a greater effectiveness of the courses offered by the British Council and American Council. They considered these courses to be practice-oriented, integrating innovative teaching methodologies and helping teachers enhance their linguistic and professional competences.

The interviews helped the authors to obtain a better understanding of the differences in methods of teaching English between urban and rural schools. The key subthemes include 1) the grammar-translation approach, 2) challenges in creating more interactive classroom environments, 3) challenges of differentiated instruction, and 4) class sizes.

The rural interviewees emphasized that English language instruction in rural settings relies on the grammar-translation approach. The factor explaining this reliance is the limited access to internet and online resources, which are necessary for implementing more interactive teaching methods. As a result, rural EFL teachers face challenges in creating a more engaging and interactive learning environment in their classrooms.

Another challenge faced by rural EFL teachers, particularly those in small schools, is differentiated instruction, which requires simultaneously employing various teaching strategies to meet the individual needs of students with varying levels of English language proficiency. To implement the differentiated approach, teachers must be able to develop a range of instructional materials and activities, carefully plan their lessons, and effectively manage the time.

> *RT9: There can be varying levels of English language proficiency among students, so teachers must prepare different tasks for students at different levels. There are cases when students, for instance, of an intermediate level, can complete tasks of different levels during one and the same class. It depends on how the topic was covered, whether they remembered it and whether they enjoyed it. At the same time, some students may struggle to complete tasks appropriate for their proficiency level. Then, teachers must work with such students after class.*

In contrast, some urban EFL teachers highlighted that teaching in rural schools could offer advantages, particularly in terms of class size. They expressed a perspective that smaller class sizes allow for a more personalized approach to each student. By having fewer students in class, teachers may address individual learning needs more effectively, provide feedback, and foster stronger teacher–student relationships. Nevertheless, the majority of urban EFL teachers underscored that their rural counterparts often express concerns about limited school resources and inadequate facilities.

4.4 Information and Communication Component

The survey findings revealed that urban EFL teachers tend to integrate various digital technologies into their FL classrooms, with a significant majority (63.2%) actively employing internet resources, online platforms, and applications. In contrast, rural EFL teachers demonstrated a lower rate of technology integration, with only 37.3% of the participants employing technologies on a regular basis and 54.7% acknowledging infrequent incorporation of digital tools into their teaching practices. Among those who did not employ technologies in their EFL classroom or rarely employed them, the main challenges included unstable internet connections and poorly resourced classrooms.

The researchers organized the perceived needs of EFL teachers concerning their use of ICTs when teaching English into six categories: internet access, free internet teaching resources, ICT equipment, courses for EFL teachers on the use of ICT, multimedia classrooms, and specialized programs for language learning (see Table 9).

Table 9. Perceived Needs of EFL Teachers for the Effective Use of ICT in the Classroom

	Urban EFL Teachers		Rural EFL Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Internet access	60	19.1	107	50,5
Free internet teaching resources	25	8.0	14	6.6
ICT equipment	64	20.4	44	20.8
Courses for EFL teachers on the use of ICT	116	36.9	10	4.7
Multimedia classrooms	16	5.1	18	8.5
Specialized programs for language learning	4	1.3	-	-

Rural teachers expressed a significantly greater demand for internet access, with 50.5% reporting this as a need compared to 19.1% of urban teachers. Although both groups highlighted the importance of free internet teaching resources and ICT equipment, the proportions were relatively similar between urban and rural teachers. However, compared with their rural counterparts, urban teachers appeared to express a slightly greater need for courses on ICT use and specialized language learning programs.

The interviews reinforced the aforementioned findings through the following subthemes: 1) access to the internet, 2) need for equipment and multimedia classrooms, and 3) ICT skills development.

In their interview responses, all the rural EFL teachers expressed concerns regarding internet access, underscoring the challenges they faced in integrating ICTs into their classes. This limitation in the use of digital tools and resources in EFL classrooms may consequently impact the quality of instruction. Another concern is the need for multimedia classrooms equipped with interactive boards, computers, projectors, and so on. Limited access to such classrooms restricts rural EFL teachers' opportunities to conduct classes in a more interactive and effective way. Both urban and rural teachers acknowledged underdeveloped ICT skills and highlighted the need for professional courses to prepare them for the efficient and adequate use of ICT in teaching English.

> *RT8: "We have two English language classrooms, and neither of them is adequately equipped. I often have to bring my own laptop to*

conduct lessons. Sometimes, if possible, I arrange to switch classrooms for at least one lesson."

RT7: Our school recently underwent renovations, but not all classrooms have been equipped with the necessary technology. Our English language classroom lacks an interactive board. Consequently, when we have special events, we must search for a classroom that is equipped with an interactive whiteboard. Our daily classes, thus, are conducted without the use of any technology.

UT10: I would like to develop my ICT skills further, to learn, for example, how to create my own website, particularly one where students can access and where I can share the methods and approaches I have used. Additionally, I would like to learn how to create applications for English learning, focusing on areas such as phonetics or addressing grammar gaps. These applications should allow students to access internet resources quickly, to respond promptly to tasks or to acquire information. This emphasizes the importance for teachers not only to use existing resources but also to be able to create and compile their own digital materials.

4.5 Intercultural Component

Via the questionnaire items in this section, the researchers aimed to explore EFL teachers' self-assessment of their intercultural competence. They used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. They present some of the key items and their mean scores for each of the groups in Table 10.

Table 10. EFL Teachers' Self-Assessment of Their Intercultural Competence

Item	Urban EFL Teachers		Rural EFL Teachers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I always broaden my knowledge about the target language culture.	3.97	1.13	3.89	1.17
I am familiar with the cultural norms and unique characteristics of the target language culture (for example, cuisine, clothing, greetings, etiquette).	3.95	1.12	3.98	1.05
I can differentiate the communicative behavior of individuals from different cultures in various social environments (such as in family settings or professional environments).	3.82	1.08	3.82	1.06
I teach learners to equally respect the values and beliefs of individuals from other cultures.	4.13	1.13	4.13	1.12
I easily adapt in social settings with people from diverse cultures.	3.96	1.17	4	1.12

Overall, the findings reveal that both urban and rural EFL teachers generally demonstrated positive self-assessments of their intercultural competence, with only minor discrepancies observed. The results also show that EFL teachers, despite their geographic location, recognized the importance of enhancing their intercultural skills to prepare their learners for effective communication and interaction with people from different cultures.

The interviews revealed two key subthemes: 1) broadening one's own intercultural knowledge and 2) broadening students' intercultural knowledge.

The results of the interviews showed that the majority of EFL teachers, both urban and rural, integrated the intercultural component into their classes. However, urban teachers tended to broaden their intercultural knowledge through various strategies, such as attending webinars on intercultural teaching, watching documentaries, and reading articles. Further, urban teachers provided more expanded responses describing ways of developing their students' cultural knowledge. They mentioned conducting extracurricular activities and events, searching for relevant cultural information from internet sources and specialized websites (e.g., the British Council), and drawing learners' attention to cultural differences through classroom discussions. In rural teachers' approaches to their own and learners' intercultural development, they relied mainly on the textual content of EFL textbooks. These textbooks typically contain tailored cultural information and activities that reflect surface aspects of cultures and do not provide opportunities for comparison and contrast. Given the limited access to the internet in rural settings, access to additional resources that could help enhance learners' exposure to the target language culture seems to be restricted.

4.6 Managerial Component

Via the items in this questionnaire section, based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, the interviewers asked the participants to rate their agreement with the statements concerning participation in decision-making in their schools (see Table 11).

Table 11. EFL Teachers' Self-Assessment of Participation in Decision-Making Processes

Item	Urban EFL Teachers		Rural EFL Teachers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
The school administration supports my suggestions and recommendations regarding school management, methodological innovations, and so on.	3.13	0.66	3.65	0.64
The school administration creates all conditions for my self-realization.	3.25	0.71	3.17	0.68
There are adequate opportunities for teachers to actively participate in discussions regarding school-related issues.	3.52	1.18	3.57	1.10
I feel the school administration values my opinions and suggestions.	3.58	1.17	3.60	1.10
I am satisfied with the opportunities for teacher participation in decision-making processes at my school.	3.47	1.13	3.54	1.12

Although the overall perceptions of urban and rural EFL teachers' participation in decision-making processes are positive, there are some

significant trends worth noting. Compared with their rural counterparts, urban EFL teachers, on average, reported lower mean scores for statements related to the school administration's support for their suggestions and recommendations, as well as for creating conditions for self-realization. This suggests a disparity in support for professional growth and for school management practices among urban teachers. Additionally, both urban and rural teachers believed that they had limited opportunities to actively participate in issues related to school management, which indicates overall dissatisfaction with the extent to which teachers are involved in decision-making processes within their schools.

The researchers identified two key subthemes during the interviews: 1) professional development support and 2) school administration support for teachers' suggestions and recommendations.

In the interviews, both urban and rural EFL teachers expressed positive views, emphasizing that the administration of their schools supported their professional development. Whenever a teacher intended to take professional development courses, the administration readily adjusted schedules, if needed, or arranged for a substitute teacher. The majority of the interviewees also stated that their school administration was receptive to teachers' recommendations and suggestions for improving the educational process and underscored the importance of constructive feedback, not only indicating shortcomings but also providing possible solutions for improvement.

5. Discussion

Drawing from the perspectives of urban and rural EFL teachers, the findings of this study provide useful insights into the concerns and challenges of creating a favorable FL educational environment, considered to be one of the key factors influencing the quality of FL education in Kazakhstani secondary schools. The analysis of the componential model of an FL educational environment proposed in the framework of this research helped to reveal certain disparities in teaching English between urban and rural schools in Kazakhstan.

5.1 Poor Infrastructure

One of the major challenges faced by rural EFL teachers is unstable internet connectivity and the lack of equipment essential for conducting engaging, interactive, high-quality EFL classes. The results from both the survey and interview discussions revealed that only a few rural schools had been renovated recently and provided with adequate equipment. However, the number of multimedia classrooms is still insufficient. Other researchers have reported similar findings about inadequate access to the internet and a shortage of technological resources (Afzal Tajik et al., 2022; Chankseliani et al, 2020; Nurbayev, 2021). According to the Concept of the Development of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, at present, rural schools lag behind urban schools in infrastructure development and equipment: only 66% of rural schools are equipped with modernized classrooms; 2,000 rural schools do not have access to the internet. The Concept recognizes the gaps in the technological provisions between urban and rural schools and sets the aim of 100% internet coverage for all schools in Kazakhstan by 2025.

5.2 ICT Skills

The pandemic has underscored the significance of ICT skills for educators as a crucial aspect of their professionalism. According to OECD (2019b), there is a substantial demand (approximately 30%) among Kazakhstani teachers for training courses aimed at enhancing IT competencies. Despite the fact that in 2020, 347,000 teachers participated in professional development programs focused on online and distance teaching, the sudden shift to remote formats posed specific challenges in organizing and conducting online classes for educators. The survey results of the present research showing a greater need for ICT courses for urban EFL teachers may indicate that in urban schools with more developed infrastructure and resources, there is a greater expectation for teachers to employ technology effectively in their teaching practices. Conversely, rural EFL teachers, who have limited internet access and limited technological resources, prioritize the aforementioned challenges as crucial barriers that prevent them from fully utilizing modern teaching methods based on the use of ICT.

5.3 Professional Development

Poor infrastructure and limited or no access to the internet restrict rural EFL teachers' opportunities to develop their teaching methodologies. Unlike their urban counterparts, who often participate in professional development courses annually or every 3 years, the majority of rural EFL teachers attend such courses only once every 5 years. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On the Status of Teachers," which mandates professional development courses for teachers once every 5 years, stipulated this interval. However, this frequency fails to keep pace with the rapid development of pedagogical knowledge, skills, and competencies and does not align with international standards for the continuous and flexible professional development of educators. Various research findings support tThis observation. For instance, Shamatov et al. (2023) highlighted that existing professional development courses in Kazakhstan often do not effectively enhance teacher capacity and capability because they are mainly theory-laden and lack practical implications. The issue of English language proficiency development among EFL teachers also remains relevant.

5.4 English Language Proficiency

The findings from the present research indicate that urban EFL teachers are more consistent in enhancing their FL competence by taking language courses or preparing f. Several previous studies underscore the disparity in English language proficiency between urban and rural teachers. Karabassova (2020) noted that despite being issued Cambridge English Placement Test certificates, teachers from rural schools admitted that these certificates did not reflect their actual level of English language proficiency. In the research by Sagintayeva (2014), many participants expressed concerns about the English language proficiency of teachers, highlighting that low English language proficiency can hinder both teachers' and students' readiness for English-based instruction. Thus, whereas urban teachers may have

greater access to language courses and resources, rural teachers often face challenges in accessing similar opportunities due to limited resources and infrastructure.

5.5 Intercultural Competence

The rural EFL teachers participating in this research emphasized that their geographical location and limited communication opportunities with foreign speakers of English made it challenging for them to develop their own and their students' intercultural competence. Unlike their urban counterparts, who may have greater language immersion opportunities and greater access to educational resources, rural teachers often find themselves isolated from such experiences. They rely on textbooks and traditional teaching materials, which may not adequately address the complexities of intercultural communication.

A number of Kazakhstani researchers have focused on various aspects of intercultural competence, dealing mainly with students' and teachers' perceptions, methods of assessment, and instructional practices (Gelisli & Kazykhankyzy, 2019; Kassymova, 2016; Naubay & Kuzembekova, 2023; Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020). However, none of these scholars have explored the comparative aspects of intercultural teaching practices of EFL teachers in urban and rural schools in Kazakhstan.

6. Conclusion

This study's authors examined the quality of FL education in urban and rural secondary schools in Kazakhstan from the perspective of EFL teachers. The model of the language educational environment proposed in the framework of this research, consisting of six components—linguistic, sociopsychological, methodical, information and communication, intercultural, and managerial—helped the researchers to identify disparities in providing FL education in urban and rural settings of the country. Regarding the linguistic component, rural EFL teachers face limited opportunities to enhance their language proficiency, which may hinder their teaching effectiveness. The sociopsychological component shows that both urban and rural EFL teachers emphasize the importance of teacher–student and teacher–parent relationships. The methodical component highlights that rural EFL teachers have fewer professional development opportunities, which limits their ability to enhance their innovative teaching strategies. Regarding the information and communication component, unstable internet connectivity and insufficient multimedia resources restrict rural EFL teachers' opportunities to integrate technology into their teaching practices. The intercultural component shows that rural EFL teachers have limited access to resources and programs that could enhance their intercultural competence and help them better prepare their students for intercultural dialogue. Finally, the managerial component indicates that although urban EFL teachers report more support from school administration, both urban and rural EFL teachers underscore that they have limited opportunities to actively participate in decision-making processes.

Considering the aforementioned findings, this study's authors provide the following recommendations to enhance the quality of the FL educational environment in rural schools:

The infrastructure of rural schools should be improved on a regular basis, including stable internet connectivity, and ensuring a sufficient number of multimedia classrooms with essential educational resources such as digital materials and online platforms. Government authorities should prioritize the allocation of funding and resources to support rural schools.

Rural EFL teachers should be provided with regular and accessible professional development opportunities both offline and online, including workshops, training sessions, and courses focused on language teaching methodologies, intercultural communication, and the integration of technology into the classroom. The courses should be more practice-oriented, providing EFL teachers with an opportunity to visit classes of their urban counterparts.

Rural EFL teachers should have access to language proficiency courses, immersion programs, internships at international schools abroad, training courses on intercultural teaching funded by the government, and opportunities for language practice and interaction with native speakers of English.

These recommendations can be valuable for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to address the challenges faced by rural EFL teachers and improve the quality of the FL educational environment in rural schools.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Elmira Gerfanova conceptualized and developed the literature review, interpreted the data, presented the arguments in the article and wrote the manuscript. Dr. Ainagul Ismagulova contributed to the literature review, edition and revision of the paper. Dr. Gulmira Rakisheva contributed to edition and revision of the paper. Dr. Diana Sabitova collected and analyzed the data. Dr. Anna Yessengaliyeva contributed to edition and revision of the paper.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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