

MGMP-SUPPORTED HOTS INSTRUCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION AMONG RURAL EFL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum encourages English teachers to apply Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in their teaching practices so that students can think critically, communicate effectively, and actively participate in the learning process. However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in rural areas are not yet prepared to design student-centered, HOTS-oriented lessons due to limited facilities, students' English proficiency, and school readiness. This study specifically focuses on the influence of the Subject Teachers' Professional Development Group/*Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran* (MGMP) in fostering the transformation of five EFL teachers in rural areas, with a focus on how HOTS-oriented teaching is implemented. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected and analyzed through semi-structured interviews, teaching modules, MGMP materials, and the *Tes Kendali Mutu* (TKM) Summative Test through thematic analysis. The results indicate that MGMP facilitates a paradigm shift among teachers from centered, lower-order thinking practices to student-centered instruction incorporating HOTS. The research results also show that, despite facing the complexities of teacher readiness and other challenges in their respective classrooms, teachers have become increasingly competent in HOTS pedagogy and more confident in designing HOTS activities. These results indicate that MGMP can function as a collaborative professional learning community that supports the transformation of teachers' instruction, thereby potentially contributing to teacher professional development programs in rural EFL contexts that focus on HOTS-oriented teaching.

Keywords: EFL classes, HOTS-oriented teaching, MGMP, student-centered learning, teaching transformation

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, HOTS is incorporated into the Merdeka Curriculum as one of the components of the Merdeka Curriculum, which serves as a practical guide for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This curriculum, based on Bloom's revised taxonomy, encourages students to use HOTS such as analysis and evaluation, and to construct knowledge rather than merely memorize or repeat (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). HOTS-oriented instruction drives EFL learning by enabling students to use the language for critical thinking, problem-solving, and meaningful communication, rather than merely grammar and vocabulary (Singh & Marappan, 2020). Thus, English language instruction will evolve from teacher-led explanations and the repetition of facts into a learning experience that involves students' reasoning, interpretation, and justification of ideas.

The successful implementation of HOTS depends on teachers' ability to design meaningful and open-ended tasks, given the complexity of higher-order cognitive processes. According to research conducted by Brookhart (2010), HOTS tasks involve problem-solving, analysis, evaluation, and the justification of answers with evidence. These principles can be integrated into EFL classrooms as discussion-based learning methods, collaborative practices, project-based tasks, and reflective practices that allow students to use English purposefully. This is closely related to student-centered learning, as students play an active role in constructing meaning, sharing information, and evaluating other information. However, implementing this effectively while considering the specific context of each classroom can sometimes be challenging, as limitations in both teachers' and students' contexts are common.

Previous studies indicate that, despite these challenges, implementing HOTS-oriented teaching remains challenging in the EFL context in Indonesia. Although teachers may recognize the importance of HOTS, their teaching practices are often hindered by students' English proficiency, limited pedagogical knowledge, inadequate instructional materials, assessment requirements, and classroom facilities (Dima et al., 2021; Faradella et al., 2024; Rachmawati & Purwati, 2021). Consequently, these challenges often lead teachers to rely on lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) such as rote learning, memorizing facts, and grammar-driven exercises because these types of tasks are considered easier to implement within the constraints of the classroom environment. As a result, the aspirations of the Merdeka Curriculum do not always translate into teaching practices conducive to student-centered and HOTS-oriented classroom activities.

These challenges are particularly acute in rural and under-resourced educational settings. EFL teachers in rural areas often have to teach under far-from-ideal conditions and in environments with minimal teaching resources, unstable internet connections, inadequate infrastructure, and students with varying levels of motivation and English proficiency (Hikmah & Astuti, 2025; Kusuma, 2022; Pasutri & Yeni, 2022; Supriadi et al., 2023). These contexts influence how teachers interpret and implement HOTS in their classrooms. For example, nervousness or limited vocabulary can make students reluctant to engage in in-depth conversations or speaking exercises. Teachers also face limited access to visual aids, projectors, digital tools, and contextual learning materials, due to restrictions that limit active learning activities and constrain implementation. Therefore, HOTS-oriented teaching in rural classrooms is influenced by teachers' beliefs, institutional support, student readiness, and classroom realities.

This implies that pedagogical change should not be viewed merely as a matter of whether a teacher chooses to implement it. In short, teachers require ongoing pedagogical support through professional development that enables them to understand curriculum expectations, modify classroom practices to implement them, and reflect on the dilemmas they face daily. Findings from this study indicate that professional development is crucial for transforming teaching practices because it provides teachers with an understanding of the pedagogical implications of curriculum components, structured opportunities to share experiences, and a phased approach to changing their practices. Subject Teachers' Professional Development Group/*Musyawahar Guru Mata Pelajaran* (henceforth, MGMP) in Indonesia is a form of a professional learning community, where teachers discuss aspects of teaching practice in relation to real-life problems and solutions, share content such as lesson plans and best practices, design learning materials, or plan together for collaborative teaching in the classroom.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Bloom's taxonomy, as revised by Anderson & Krathwohl (2001). Vygotsky posits that learning and professional development can occur through communities of practice, social interaction and collaboration, and appropriate scaffolding. For the purposes of this study, the MGMP is described as a community of practice where teachers build pedagogical knowledge through discussions with peers about school practices, reflective dialogues on teaching and learning, collaborative problem-solving regarding classroom issues, and sharing experiences from their classrooms. Meanwhile, Anderson and Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's taxonomy lays the conceptual foundation for HOTS-based instruction by focusing on higher-order cognitive processes, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Collectively, these theories serve as an analytical lens for examining how collaborative professional development through MGMP facilitates the transformation of teachers' instruction from teacher-centered and rote-learning practices toward student-centered EFL practices oriented toward HOTS.

MGMP and professional learning communities have been examined in several studies as mechanisms for supporting teacher development. These MGMP activities provide a platform for member teachers to innovate in student-centered learning and reflective practice (Rahayu et al., 2026). Participation in workshops, seminars, or collaborative learning can also enhance teachers' pedagogical competencies and their readiness to teach (Rachmadhany et al., 2025; Subekti & Kurniawati, 2020). Furthermore, Nurkamto & Sarosa (2020) found that professional development can help EFL teachers develop reflective teaching, while Pangestika & Setiawan (2023) found that participation in MGMP fosters teacher professionalism. Mawaddah & Chaiyaporn (2024) found that professional development programs can make a positive contribution to teachers' future pedagogical growth, but challenges in implementing these programs were noted regarding digital literacy and infrastructure.

This study is particularly timely because the ongoing implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires teachers to adopt HOTS-oriented and student-centered teaching practices. Although previous studies have examined the challenges teachers face in implementing HOTS (Dima et al., 2021; Faradella et al., 2024; Rachmawati & Purwati, 2021), the role of professional development through MGMP (Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020; Pangestika & Setiawan, 2023), and the contribution of professional learning communities to teacher development (Mawaddah & Chaiyaporn, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2026), these studies have largely addressed these issues separately. Research specifically exploring how MGMP supports the transformation of EFL

teachers' instruction in rural areas toward HOTS-oriented and student-centered teaching during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum remains limited.

Additionally, although some previous studies have found that teachers' pedagogical knowledge, students' English proficiency, and resource constraints pose obstacles to the implementation of HOTS (Faradella et al., 2024; Rachmawati & Purwati, 2021), other studies indicate that MGMP and professional development contribute to enhancing teachers' pedagogical competencies for more reflective practice and greater professionalism (Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020; Pangestika & Setiawan, 2023). Research on professional learning communities indicates that collaborative practices can effectively support improvements in the learning process (Mawaddah & Chaiyaporn, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2026). However, most of these studies have not considered these issues simultaneously. Only a few studies have thoroughly examined the support provided by MGMP in guiding a shift in the curricular roles of EFL teachers in rural areas toward HOTS-oriented and student-centered learning. Few studies have also examined how teachers reconstruct their understanding of HOTS, how they make sense of resources through collaborative professional learning, or the implications for routine classroom teaching practices.

To bridge this gap, this study investigates how MGMPs facilitate changes in the teaching practices of EFL teachers in rural areas toward HOTS-oriented and student-centered instruction during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The significance of this study lies in its integrated examination of HOTS implementation, teacher challenges, and professional development, which previous research has largely examined separately. By examining these aspects through the lens of collaborative professional development, this study provides insight into how teaching transformation can occur in rural EFL contexts. The findings of this study are likely to have implications for the literature on teacher professional development more generally, as well as for HOTS-oriented pedagogy in resource-limited settings or in developing countries.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how MGMP as a professional learning community facilitates rural EFL teachers' instructional change toward student-centered and HOTS-oriented teaching. Specifically, this study explores how teachers experience the transition from teacher-centered instruction to more participatory classroom practices and what strategies they use to implement HOTS-oriented learning within their contextual limitations. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does MGMP facilitate the transition from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching?
2. What strategies do teachers use to implement HOTS-oriented teaching?

METHOD

This qualitative case study examines the transformation of teaching practices among EFL teachers in rural areas toward HOTS-oriented and student-centered learning, facilitated by the MGMP. Since the aim of this study is to explore teachers' experiences, perceptions, changes in teaching, and classroom realities rather than to measure variables quantitatively, a qualitative approach is deemed appropriate. This study focuses on investigating teachers' processes of reinterpreting HOTS and their adaptations to their teaching after participating in MGMP in rural schools.

Therefore, the case study design is considered appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of this phenomenon in a real-life context. In this context, the transformation of EFL teaching in rural areas may depend on a series of interrelated factors, including the local context, student readiness, classroom interactions, institutional support, and infrastructure. Accordingly, the researchers employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how pedagogical changes emerge from teachers' experiences within the MGMP (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Thematic analysis was also employed to identify themes and patterns related to participants' experiences and their teaching practices. The results were discussed with reference to the theoretical framework and relevant literature on HOTS instruction, student-centered learning, and professional development (Ginting & Kuswandono, 2020). The study sought to examine how teachers adapt to and negotiate pedagogical changes within the realities of their classrooms.

The context of this study was a rural junior high school where EFL is taught, where teachers implemented the Merdeka Curriculum and participated in MGMP activities. The choice of a rural educational setting was based on findings from previous research indicating that the implementation of HOTS-oriented learning in such contexts often faces various pedagogical and infrastructure challenges. Although many EFL teachers in rural areas have maximized the use of technology for distance teaching (Kusuma, 2022), it cannot be denied that they still face issues with technology access and interconnectivity, as well as a lack of educational support, which can lead to suboptimal teaching quality and learning experiences in the context of distance professional development (Saputri & Sukarno, 2024).

The MGMP activities attended by participants included workshops, collaborative discussions, sessions on sharing teaching practices, lesson planning activities, and professional development seminars on HOTS-oriented learning, student-centered teaching pedagogy, and reflective pedagogical practices for classroom innovation. These activities were designed to help teachers share challenges and teaching strategies appropriate to their respective contexts. The participating schools also have had varying levels of learning support and access to technology. Others have Some had limited access to LCD projectors, the internet, and digital learning materials.

Field conditions influenced how teachers adapt HOTS-oriented learning tasks in their teaching process. This study focused on English teachers who actively participate in MGMP activities held at junior high schools located in rural areas. A purposive sampling design was used to select participants based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently teaching English in a rural educational setting, (2) being a member of an MGMP that develops curricula and implements HOTS-oriented learning, and (3) having prior experience in implementing HOTS-oriented learning in classroom practice.

The participants had varying levels of teaching experience and educational background. This diversity allowed the study to capture a range of perspectives on pedagogical changes, classroom implementation, and challenges in the learning process. The participants included teachers who had been teaching for a long time and were accustomed to collaborative professional development programs, as well as teachers who had recently been trained in HOTS-oriented learning through a student-centered approach.

The selection of five participants was guided by the principle of information richness, whereby

participants were purposively chosen because they could provide in-depth and diverse insights into the phenomenon under investigation rather than to achieve statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). To protect participants' anonymity, they were all identified as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 throughout the study.

Table 1. Participants' Background Information

Participant	School type	Teaching experience	MGMP Participation
Teacher 1	Public junior high school	8 years	Active participant
Teacher 2	Private junior high school	5 years	Active participant
Teacher 3	Public junior high school	10 years	Active participant
Teacher 4	Private junior high school	6 years	Active participant
Teacher 5	Private junior high school	8 years	Active participant

Table 1 shows that the participants in this study had more than three years of teaching experience, and all of them were active in MGMP activities.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences of participating in MGMP and changes in their teaching practices, while also providing space to explore emerging issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview questions used in this study focused on participants' understanding of HOTS, teaching practices before and after joining the MGMP, strategies for implementing HOTS in classroom practice, and difficulties encountered when engaging students in HOTS-oriented instruction.

Therefore, the interviews were conducted in Indonesian so that participants could speak more freely about their experiences, insights, and the realities in their classrooms. After obtaining participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed as data for this study. This required the researchers to ask more follow-up questions in order to explore these topics in greater depth. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with MGMP training materials, the Summative Test/Tes Kendali Mutu (TKM), and learning modules.

The analysis of the learning modules explored various shortcomings, such as a lack of explicit HOTS objectives and student-centered activities in lesson plans. This research investigates the pedagogical content and professional learning practices offered in MGMP materials. The analysis of summative test questions aims to determine whether assessment practices evaluate cognitive demands oriented toward HOTS. This study employs methodological triangulation by collecting information from various data sources to better validate the findings. The triangulation process involved comparing interview findings with relevant instructional documents and assessment practices to identify consistencies and inconsistencies in classroom practices, teachers' perceptions, and reported implementation.

Participants were briefed on the study's objectives and methods before taking part in this research. Participation in this study was voluntary; all participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes. Throughout the study, pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, and their identities were not disclosed anywhere in the research

report.

Interviews were audio-recorded using a password-protected recorder and transcribed and stored securely, with access restricted to the researchers. The researchers also created a relaxed interview atmosphere, ensuring that each participant could share their experiences without feeling pressured. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Given that this is a study of pedagogical issues, professional narratives, and issues regarding teaching practices. Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

This approach allows for the systematic identification, exploration, and synthesis of emerging themes related to MGMP teachers' experiences; contributions to educational reform; and pedagogy oriented toward HOTS. The analysis process involves several phases. First, during the familiarization stage, the researchers read and reread interview transcripts as well as instructional documents drawn from the complete dataset. This familiarization led to the identification of key statements regarding the implementation of HOTS and provided insights into educational changes, teaching processes, and contextual issues in learning.

Second, initial codes were created for all key aspects of the data. The coding scheme was designed based on patterns emerging from the data related to instructional changes, teachers' perceptions of HOTS, classroom interactions, professional learning experiences, and the broader contextual realities of the classroom. These descriptive codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes.

Third, the researchers grouped the first-level codes into potential themes by identifying patterns and relationships that appeared meaningful across the data. Initial themes describing teachers' experiences related to changes in teaching and learning, the implementation of HOTS, and professional development through MGMP were formulated by grouping similar codes.

Fourth, the researchers reviewed and revised these initial themes to ensure coherence, consistency, and relevance across the dataset. Data analysis involved comparing each theme with illustrative quotes from interview transcripts, teaching modules, MGMP materials, and assessment documents to ensure that interpretations were evidence-based.

Fifth, the themes were defined and named to capture the patterns identified in the data. Each theme was then elaborated to describe specific aspects of the teachers' experiences and the resulting teaching transformations.

Finally, these themes were interpreted and reported by relating the findings to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, Bloom's taxonomy as revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), and relevant literature on HOTS-oriented pedagogy, student-centered learning, teacher professional development, and instructional change in the context of EFL.

The researchers used data triangulation and participant verification to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Data from interviews and related documents were compared through triangulation, while participant verification was conducted by sharing interview summaries and preliminary

interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings. To further enhance credibility, selected participant quotations were included to support the interpretations and represent participants' voices and experiences. The researchers also reviewed and compared the data multiple times during the coding and analysis process to minimize potential misunderstandings. The study provides a rich and in-depth description of how EFL teachers adapted their practices in rural areas, enabling readers to better understand the realities of EFL teacher development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines changes in teachers' teaching practices after joining the MGMP by identifying HOTS-oriented teaching strategies identified through thematic analysis. Teachers in Theme I shifted their pedagogical practices from teacher-centered and LOTS-oriented teaching to student-centered and HOTS-oriented practices. The second theme, meanwhile, concerns the teaching strategies teachers employed to implement HOTS-based learning processes in EFL classrooms in rural areas. Furthermore, these findings also highlight several contextual factors that hinder the consistent implementation of HOTS training, including student readiness levels and language assessment tools, as well as limitations in teaching resources. Therefore, the findings and discussion sections are organized based on these main themes.

Teachers' instructional transformation through MGMP

Table 2. Instructional Shift Based on Interview Data

Code Sub	Aspect	Theme	Evidence	Interpretation
C1	Teacher-centered and LOTS-oriented instruction	Teacher-centered and LOTS-oriented instruction	Focus on textbooks, grammar exercises, and recall questions	Teaching practices were still dominated by transmission-based instruction
C2	Initial understanding of HOTS	Surface-level understanding	HOTS was perceived as involving "difficult questions"	Teachers' understanding of HOTS was still limited
C3	Understanding after MGMP participation	Cognitive shift toward HOTS	HOTS was understood as analysis, evaluation, and creation	A conceptual shift in teachers' understanding occurred
C4	Instructional Change	Student-centered practices	Group discussions, project-based activities, and open-ended questions	Teachers began to implement participatory learning practices
C5	Classroom Interaction	Interactive learning	Student collaboration and participation	Classroom learning became more student-centered
C6	Role of MGMP	Professional learning support	Workshops, discussions, and peer sharing	MGMP facilitated pedagogical transformation
C7	Challenges	Contextual constraints	Students' language proficiency, limited time, and inadequate facilities	HOTS implementation was influenced by rural contextual factors

Code Sub	Aspect	Theme	Evidence	Interpretation
C8	Degree of Change	Partial transformation	Inconsistent implementation	The transformation process remained gradual and inconsistent

Teacher-centered instruction before MGMP participation

Based on the interview results, teachers' teaching practices prior to joining the MGMP were still dominated by a teacher-centered, text-oriented approach focused on LOTS (Code C1). Classroom teaching and learning activities focused largely on grammar exercises, reading comprehension, and questions that relied primarily on memorization. HOTS were initially viewed merely as difficult questions rather than as higher-order thinking processes requiring analysis and reasoning (Code C2).

Teacher 1 explained:

"At first, I thought HOTS was just a set of challenging questions for students."

Similarly, Teacher 5 stated:

"I used to strictly follow the textbook and ask students questions with structured answers."

Similarly, Teacher 2 stated that learning activities were primarily focused on covering the material and preparing students for conventional classroom exams. This shows that teachers relied on a transmission-based pedagogy, in which the teacher was the primary source of knowledge in the classroom, while students were primarily viewed as passive recipients (Code C1).

These findings indicate that teachers initially relied on transmission-oriented practices characterized by a heavy reliance on textbooks, teacher-centered instruction, and learning tasks focused on memorization. The use of these practices indicates that HOTS had been misconceptualized as simply referring to questions of greater complexity rather than to higher-order cognitive processes (Code C1 and C2). These findings align with Puspitasari's (2025) report, which found that teachers initially associated HOTS-oriented pedagogy with the complexity of difficult questions; however, their understanding of HOTS within the pedagogical process deepened over time.

Instructional changes after MGMP participation

Teachers demonstrated cognitive and pedagogical shifts toward more student-centered learning after participating in the MGMP activities (Code C3). Following their participation in the MGMP, teachers began implementing collaborative discussions, project-based learning, reflective questions, and open-ended tasks that encouraged students to explain and justify their thought processes (Code C4).

Teacher 3 explained:

“Instead of simply choosing the correct option, I started asking them to explain their answers and share their opinions.”

Similarly, Teacher 4 stated:

“Now I try to integrate reflective thinking and conversation-based tasks so that students think more critically.”

Teacher 5 also reported:

“I implement project-based activities because students become more engaged and creative in class.”

These changes also showed a shift toward more interactive classroom learning, where students actively collaborated, participated in discussions, and engaged in meaningful learning activities (Code C5).

The findings from the teaching modules were triangulated with the interview data. The HOTS-oriented objectives illustrated in the modules focused on analysis, evaluation, and creation. Multiple learning activities were designed for students to compare texts, discuss concepts, evaluate information, and create posters and dialogues.

One module instruction stated:

“Compare the two pieces of writing and write about which one you think is more convincing.”

Another task instructed students to:

“Write a brief conversation about daily life and perform it together.”

The research results indicate a trend toward teachers transitioning from textbook-based learning to experience-based learning after participating in the MGMP.

The findings indicate a gradual shift among teachers involved in the MGMP from a teacher-centered, textbook-based approach toward a more interactive and student-centered approach. This suggests that the outcomes of the MGMP activities, which have been implemented gradually, have steered teachers away from textbook-based learning toward student-centered learning.

Although these findings provide evidence of instructional transformation, classroom practices were not yet sufficiently consistent to demonstrate more substantial changes (Code C8). This aligns with research (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) that distinguishes between lower-order and higher-order thinking processes.

MGMP as a facilitator of instructional change

Research findings also indicate that MGMP serves as an important platform for teachers' professional development and pedagogical change. Workshops, group discussions, peer-to-peer experience sharing, and practical lesson planning help teachers understand learning practices oriented toward Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Code C6).

Although problem-solving projects and collaborative approaches are important, the theoretical foundation provided through MGMP also plays a significant role in supporting teachers' understanding of HOTS (Code C6). As explained by Teacher 2:

"MGMP has helped me realize that HOTS can be applied through projects designed to solve problems and through collaboration, but we also need a theoretical foundation."

Similarly, Teacher 1 said:

"I learned from MGMP discussions how to keep students active during class."

The MGMP training materials analyzed in this study included discourse analysis for meaningful learning, interactive learning, and genre-based approaches related to pedagogical issues. These teaching methods all emphasize the use of authentic, process-oriented, and meaningful language rather than rote learning; they focus on communication, community-based environments in the target language, and student engagement. The relationship between the three data sources in Table 2 provides evidence that MGMP offers collaborative and reflective professional support that supports teachers' professional learning and instructional development (Code C6).

These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing collaborative professional learning and pedagogical support to help teachers refocus on interactive teaching (Pangestika & Setiawan, 2023; Subekti & Kurniawati, 2020). Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) note that changing practice is one of the most difficult and complex challenges to manage, and that professional development must foster conditions that are active, collaborative, and contextually relevant.

Contextual challenges in implementing HOTS-oriented instruction

Nevertheless, although teachers demonstrated progress in transforming the learning process, the lack of a supportive environment remained a major obstacle to the consistent implementation of HOTS-based learning (Code C7). Teacher stated:

"I can't get all the students to participate in discussions; they just lack confidence in speaking English."

Similarly, Teacher 5 said:

"Other students are still afraid to speak up in discussions because the subject matter is difficult for them."

In addition, teachers reported difficulties balancing the demands of HOTS-oriented learning with students' language readiness. The implementation of HOTS-oriented learning was also limited by a lack of learning facilities (Code C7). Teacher 4 explained:

“Sometimes it is difficult to facilitate interactive learning because projectors and learning media are quite limited.”

These findings indicate that the interplay between pedagogical preferences, students' language proficiency and self-confidence, and contextual factors is a key consideration for educators seeking to implement HOTS-oriented instruction in EFL classrooms in rural areas (Code C7). Although teachers became more aware of HOTS-oriented pedagogy after participating in the MGMP, student readiness and available teaching resources continued to influence classroom practices. These findings align with other studies showing that EFL teachers in rural areas face language-related barriers, motivational challenges, and limited implementation resources when attempting HOTS-oriented instruction (Pasutri & Yeni, 2022; Supriadi et al., 2023).

Strategies used by teachers to implement HOTS-oriented instruction

Table 3. HOTS Implementation Strategies Based on Interview Data

Code Sub	Strategy	Theme	Evidence	Interpretation
S1	Scaffolding strategies	Guiding support	Sample answers, modeling, and simplified instructions	Helped students understand hots tasks
S2	Open ended reasoning task	Critical thinking activities	Compare, justify, and explain tasks	Encouraged analysis and evaluation
S3	Collaborative learning	Group based discussion	Group discussions and project-based activities	Increased student participation
S4	Contextual and creative tasks	Meaningful learning	Posters, dialogues, and contextual tasks	Connected learning to real-life situations
S5	Reflection activities	Metacognitive learning	Reflective questions	Helped deepen students' understanding
S6	Challenges	Implementation barriers	Limited instructional time and students' language proficiency	Hots implementation was not yet optimal

Scaffolding strategies

The research findings indicate that teachers employed scaffolding strategies to help students complete tasks that focus on higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Until students were ready to perform analytical tasks, teachers provided examples, demonstrated procedures, or offered simplified guidance and step-by-step instructions (Code S1). This is important because many students are not yet accustomed to analytical discussions and reasoning-based classroom interactions in English. However, despite these efforts to transform the learning process, an unsupportive work environment remained a major challenge to sustaining HOTS-based learning. As Teacher 3 explained:

“Rather than just giving them the answers, if I guide and explain to them how to do it, their comfort level with this specific topic becomes important; I might guide them step by step and then ask them analytical questions.”

Similarly, Teacher 2 said:

“Students need to see examples first because they aren’t used to explaining their arguments in English.”

The findings indicate that teachers applied scaffolding strategies in HOTS-oriented classroom activities. Although it involves independent analysis, teachers gradually and carefully shape what they want students to do by demonstrating it directly through explicit instructions and examples. Such guidance appears to help students engage in HOTS-based learning tasks with greater confidence (Code S1).

The study identified a scaffolding approach based on step-by-step guidance within learning tasks, ranging from support for novice students with basic understanding to activities involving analytical and creative discussions among student groups. Students are expected to summarize the main ideas in a text before comparing points or analyzing arguments. This demonstrates a gradual transition and indicates that teachers maintain a balance between the challenges of HOTS and students’ language proficiency and readiness while supporting their learning (Code S6).

These findings can be interpreted through Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of second language learning, which emphasizes that learners develop competencies through guided social interaction and tailored support. Teachers’ use of step-by-step guidance and modeling illustrates how learning support facilitates the gradual development of higher-order thinking skills in students.

Open-ended and reasoning tasks

In addition, teachers designed open-ended, reasoning-based tasks that encourage students to compare, justify, explain, and evaluate ideas, as well as critically interpret concepts (Code S2). In these activities, teachers deliberately shifted classroom discourse from “knowing what” (content knowledge and memorization) to “knowing how” (analysis).

Teacher 1 explains:

“Students don’t just answer; they also justify why they gave that answer.”

Similarly, Teacher 4 states:

“What I try to do is ask reflective questions so that students can reflect on the subject more deeply.”

Similarly, the self-directed and collaborative modules of the instructional materials included more reasoning-oriented activities that required students to compare texts, analyze information, explain arguments, and evaluate ideas together. Students were asked to provide their own interpretations and justifications rather than selecting from multiple-choice options (Code S2). For example, one learning task asked students to:

“Explain the differences between two announcements and explain which one is more informative.”

Students were asked to explain why the characters in the dialogue acted as they did. These activities demonstrate how teachers strive to foster analytical reasoning and reflective thinking in English language learning.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings presented by Brookhart (2010), who argues that HOTS-oriented learning should emphasize higher-order thinking and reasoning, particularly analysis, evaluation, interpretation, and application rather than relying solely on memorization. Similarly, Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) classify analysis, evaluation, and creation as higher-order cognitive processes requiring deeper cognitive engagement. These results also align with Ginting and Kuswandono (2020), who noted in his study that HOTS-oriented EFL learning emphasizes critical meaning construction and the active use of language for communication. Thus, the presence of open-ended reasoning tasks in this study indicates that teachers have begun to incorporate higher-order thinking processes into classroom teaching practices (Code S2).

More importantly, teachers also reported that their approach to using reasoning-oriented tasks presented an ongoing challenge, particularly because many students were not yet comfortable expressing analytical ideas in English (Code S6). As a result, teachers tended to simplify their instructions and provide more examples or guidance to increase student participation in reasoning activities. These findings lead to the conclusion that HOTS-oriented learning in rural EFL classrooms requires a constant balance between high-level cognitive demands and students’ language proficiency and learning needs. (Code S6).

Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is another strategy identified in HOTS-oriented classroom instruction (Code S3). To increase student participation and engagement in the classroom, teachers often use methods such as group discussions, collaborative projects, pair work, and peer-interaction activities. Working together was perceived to reduce students’ anxiety and make it easier for them to express their ideas. Teacher 2 explains:

“Student activity increases when they collaborate in groups and exchange ideas.”

Similarly, Teacher 5 states:

“Project activities foster students’ creativity and self-confidence.”

The teaching module also describes collaborative activities in which students are asked to analyze

texts with peers, exchange views, solve problems together, and create group projects. Some classroom activities involved student discussions before groups presented their final results to the class. Among students, before they returned to present their final results collectively in class (Code S3). One of the activities asked students to:

“Work together in groups to respond to text messages and draw conclusions.”

As part of other project activities, students must create posters and short dialogues in pairs or groups that focus on everyday situations. These collaborative learning exercises appear to encourage higher levels of student interaction and participation in the classroom (Code S3).

Research findings indicate a gradual shift from teacher-centered classroom instruction toward a more participatory and dialogic learning environment. The use of collaborative learning provides opportunities to negotiate meaning, foster understanding, and support classroom interaction. Additionally, group-based learning appears to reduce students' fear of making mistakes, as ideas can be developed collectively before being presented in public. This also indicates that collaborative learning enhances student engagement and opportunities to participate in discussions, reasoning, and the construction of shared knowledge during learning activities focused on higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

Therefore, as Vygotsky (1978) argued, cognitive development can be socio-genetic in nature because learning occurs through social interaction and emerges from interactions within a community centered on the construction of shared meaning. Furthermore, through cooperative learning, shared communicative competence can be fostered in EFL classrooms because students will have more opportunities to articulate ideas, negotiate meaning, and build understanding through interaction.

Faradella et al. (2024) also argue that collaborative learning activities and discussions benefit EFL students in HOTS-based settings by enhancing critical thinking skills. Nevertheless, as teachers have also noted, it remains an issue that some students still rely on more active peers for assistance during class discussions in collaborative learning experiences (Code S6). This issue necessitates that teachers monitor student interactions more closely to ensure all students have the opportunity to engage productively in such collaborative activities (Code S6).

Contextual and creative tasks

Teachers also incorporate contextual and creative activities, such as poster-making, conversations, role-playing, presentations, and practical communication tasks, into the learning process (Code S4). The purpose of these activities is to increase experiences of using English in students' daily lives, thereby providing more opportunities for students to practice listening and speaking and encouraging responsive interaction in the classroom

For example, Teacher 5 stated,

“I look for practical connections in their daily lives to help them understand classroom tasks more easily.”

Similarly, Teacher 4 said:

“I look for practical connections in their daily lives to help them understand classroom tasks more easily.”

Likewise, these modules provide structured and contextualized English language learning activities that encourage authentic language use in meaningful communication (Code S4).

These modules train students to create posters to raise awareness about environmental issues, write dialogues about everyday conversational situations based on real conversations, and speak about their own social backgrounds. Research findings also indicate that creativity is a factor supporting classroom learning following the MGMP conducted by teachers. Instead of working on textbook assignments, teachers gradually began incorporating more creative and interactive tasks that allow students to express their thoughts visually, orally, and collaboratively (Code S4).

These results, however, align with the paper by Cahyadi et al. (2025), which states that the Merdeka Curriculum enables the implementation of deep learning pedagogy and student-centered learning. In this study, teachers used authentic and creative tasks that allowed students to actively participate in expressing their ideas and play a more active role in classroom learning (Code S4).

Reflection activities

Another strategy reported in this study involves reflective and metacognitive activities (Code S5). Based on the interviews, the teachers mentioned that they routinely use questions to encourage students to clarify their reasoning, evaluate their understanding of academic tasks, and provide deeper reflections on what happens in the classroom.

Teacher 4 stated:

“Instead, I ask students why they think that is the correct answer and give myself time to reflect on their reasoning.”

Teacher 1 also shared:

“I sometimes ask students, ‘What did you learn from the discussion?’”

This reflective approach allows students to engage more deeply with their own learning processes and reasoning. Teachers encourage students to explain how they arrived at their answers, how they arrived at the correct answer, and what they will remember after the class, rather than focusing solely on whether their answers are right or wrong (Code S5).

These findings suggest that reflective questions can help students develop their metacognitive awareness by encouraging them to reflect on their understanding and articulate their thought processes. This type of activity gives students the opportunity to revisit ideas, defend their answers, and reflect on their own learning experiences (Code S5).

This aligns with Brookhart (2010), who states that HOTS-oriented learning involves reflective thinking and helps students better analyze their own reasoning processes. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) emphasize that higher-order thinking consists not only of understanding information but also of analyzing and evaluating ideas. Therefore, reflective questions appear to serve as a key pedagogical tool that facilitates metacognitive awareness and supports higher-order thinking in EFL classrooms (Code S5).

Inconsistency between instruction and assessment

Although the results of the interviews and learning modules indicate a shift toward HOTS-oriented and student-centered learning, summative tests showed that assessment remains LOTS-oriented.

The analysis of the assessment items showed that most questions focused on lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), such as recalling facts, recognizing vocabulary, and retrieving information, whereas only a limited number of items required higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), particularly analysis and evaluation. Examples of LOTS-oriented items include:

Question:

“Work together in groups to respond to text messages and draw conclusions.”

Conversely, HOTS-oriented items required students to analyze reasoning and evaluate information, as illustrated by the following examples:

“Explain why the character changed their mind.”

“Which text is better and why?”

These results indicate a mismatch between teaching practices and assessment practices. Learning activities during classroom instruction and interactions between teachers and students have begun to shift toward a more HOTS-oriented approach, yet assessment in the form of written exams still places greater emphasis on lower-order cognitive processes.

These results are consistent with the findings of Dima et al. (2021), who noted that, although teachers have a good understanding of HOTS, there are still barriers to its implementation that result in the failure to apply HOTS-oriented practices in EFL classrooms. In line with this, Puspitasari (2025) states that initially, teachers associated HOTS with the level of difficulty of questions and the complexity of subject matter; this indicates that translating conceptual understanding into HOTS-oriented assessment remains a challenge in practice. Consequently, assessment development often does not align with teaching development.

These findings indicate that the implementation of HOTS-oriented teaching is gradual and context-dependent. Although teachers demonstrated cognitive and pedagogical shifts toward a more student-centered form of teaching, these shifts remain incomplete and are continually influenced by on-the-ground realities. These findings also have important implications for educational practice and policy in Indonesia. Professional development delivered through

MGMP should not focus solely on introducing HOTS concepts but should also be supported by mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, and practical assistance in designing and implementing HOTS-oriented assessments. HOTS-oriented instruction should be better aligned with curriculum expectations and assessment practices and supported through practical classroom implementation. In addition, teacher education programs need to better prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to teach higher-order thinking in EFL contexts while accommodating contextual constraints, particularly in rural schools.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the MGMP supported EFL teachers in rural areas in their transition from teacher-centered, LOTS-oriented teaching practices to student-centered, HOTS-oriented practices. These findings indicate that the MGMP plays an important role in supporting teachers in transforming their teaching practices through collaborative reflection, workshops, peer-sharing sessions, and collaborative lesson planning activities. The way teachers engage in these professional learning experiences enabled them to reconstruct their understanding of HOTS from merely viewing it as involving “most difficult” questions to understanding it as involving higher-order cognitive processes of analysis, evaluation, and creation.

The research findings indicate that participation in MGMP contributed to changes in pedagogical practices from teacher-centered to more student-centered and HOTS-based approaches. Teachers increasingly use collaborative learning, open-ended reasoning tasks, and scaffolding as strategies to engage students in higher-order thinking.

However, this study also found that changes in teaching practices remained incomplete and inconsistent. Teachers faced various contextual challenges, such as limited learning resources, students’ low English proficiency, limited teaching time, and students’ anxiety about using English during discussion-based activities. Furthermore, assessment practices reinforced a focus on lower-order thinking skills, which contradicted other teaching practices in the classroom. These findings suggest the need for ongoing professional development through MGMP, greater alignment between curriculum and assessment, and continued support for teachers implementing HOTS-oriented instruction. Future research could investigate different MGMP contexts and conduct in-depth observations of HOTS-oriented classroom practices over extended periods.

This study has several limitations. First, it involved only five English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in a single MGMP from one province. Although this allowed for an in-depth investigation of the teachers’ experiences, the findings are not intended to be generalized beyond this context because they are specific to this context, namely a single group of EFL teachers and a single MGMP setting. Second, this study did not involve direct classroom observations due to geographical and logistical constraints. Instead, the findings were based on triangulated data from interviews, teaching modules, and MGMP training materials. Although these sources provide substantive insights into teachers’ pedagogy, classroom observations provided concrete documentation of how HOTS-oriented teaching is implemented in the classroom.

Such observations may help clarify the mismatch between the learning process and assessment identified in this study. Further research could involve classroom observations across a broader range of MGMP contexts and include more teachers from diverse backgrounds, to provide a

more comprehensive picture of teachers' instructional practices. Additionally, future research should investigate the alignment between learning activities and HOTS-based assessment to better understand how teachers consistently teach higher-order thinking skills in both instruction and assessment.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that MGMP serves as an important source of professional learning that supports rural EFL teachers in implementing HOTS-oriented teaching. Although professional development has supported changes among rural EFL teachers, the findings suggest that sustaining these changes requires ongoing guidance, context-specific training, and continued support for designing HOTS-based assessments. Consequently, MGMP activities should extend beyond sharing teaching strategies to provide hands-on practice in designing HOTS-oriented assessment instruments. Future MGMP activities should provide context-specific assistance to rural EFL teachers to support the continued transition toward student-centered and HOTS-oriented practices in both teaching and assessment.

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