Through Their Lenses: A Photovoice Exploration of Online and Home-Based ESL Teachers' Pitfalls in the Philippines

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Abstract

Home-based and online English as a second language (ESL) work offers teachers welcome flexibility, but it also brings challenges that can wear them down over time. This study examines how those pressures shape teachers' professional well-being and day-to-day work through a critical realist lens. Using a photovoice design, 10 home-based ESL teachers from Southern Cebu acted as co-investigators. They documented their experiences through photographs and group discussions guided by the SHOWED framework that represented the questions like what is seen, what is really happening, how it relates to our lives, why it exists, how it educates others, and what can be done. In addition, the visual and verbal data were analyzed to trace patterns shaping their working lives. Five recurring themes emerged: the digital divide, routine risks, income instability, disciplinary distraction, and physiological problems. Together, these themes show how uneven access to technology, long and fragmented workdays, unstable income, student distraction in home settings, and the physical strain of screen-based work intersect in teachers' lives and affect how they teach. The findings point to the need to support educator resilience and strengthen institutional systems rather than leaving teachers to cope alone. In practical terms, the study invites ESL providers to rethink policies, technological support, workload expectations, and health provisions so they better reflect the everyday realities of home-based online teaching in the Philippine context.

Online English as a second language (ESL) instruction offers geographical advantages but presents notable pedagogical and well-being challenges (Ishak & Sulaiman, 2023). Rapid shifts, such as those during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the importance of understanding ESL educators' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies (Nazari et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in the Philippines, where online ESL is expanding rapidly amid

specific sociocultural dynamics. Despite its benefits, remote learning presents ongoing challenges for ESL teachers, including limitations in technological infrastructure, difficulties sustaining student engagement, concerns about instructional quality, and issues such as fatigue and burnout. Addressing these challenges is important for both effective teaching and teacher well-being.

Qualitative research, and photovoice in particular, is valuable for supporting teachers to articulate their lived experiences and for offering a nuanced understanding that complements quantitative data. This approach can generate insights to enhance online and home-based ESL practices and to support Philippine educators, thereby informing policy and interventions. Existing scholarship, however, lacks focused research on teachers' intrinsic perceptions of pitfalls and their personal and professional impact. Studies often overlook teachers' own accounts and the cultural, social, and economic dynamics that shape expanding online ESL contexts such as the Philippines. The underrepresentation of teacher voices in discussions about remote instruction constrains our understanding of the complexities of their work and their subjective realities.

To address this gap, the present study employs photovoice to illuminate the lived experiences of Philippine ESL teachers. This qualitative exploration of teacher perceptions in an under-researched cultural context highlights intrinsic pitfalls and allows educators to articulate challenges—a perspective largely absent from current academic discourse but essential for meaningful reform. Using Wang and Burris' photovoice methodology, the study systematically analyzes how Philippine ESL teachers perceive the pitfalls of online and home-based instruction. Photovoice enables participants to document their experiences through photography and narration, articulating both the challenges and insights they encounter. The methodology focuses on socioemotional impacts, mental health, technical difficulties, and broader implications for teaching, using visual representations and focus group interviews to provide a nuanced understanding of the issues faced by Philippine ESL teachers. Ultimately, this research aims to document these challenges to inform policy and practice and to contribute to the development of human-centered support systems. By addressing an existing research gap, it offers insights into the complexities of online teaching that may help enhance educational experiences for both teachers and students in the Philippines.

Research Questions

1. What pitfalls, if any, do online and home-based ESL teachers in Southern Cebu perceive in their work?

2. How do these perceived pitfalls converge or diverge across participants' analysis and investigator's analysis, and what shared cross-comparison themes emerge?

3. How do teachers' actual, orchestrated, and symbolic photographs differently surface those pitfalls within a Photovoice/SHOWED procedure?

4. What implications for ESL provider operations follow from these themes in the Philippine context?

Literature Review

ESL instruction has surged globally, driven by the growing demand for English proficiency in academic and professional contexts. This demand has created employment opportunities, particularly for online and home-based English teachers. Advances in digital technology have transformed language classrooms, enabling diverse modes of ESL delivery that became especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, ESL instruction increasingly shifted into domestic spaces, effectively transforming homes into workplaces. The rapid shift to online and home-based ESL instruction necessitates a careful re-evaluation of teacher education programs. Effective preparation for online teaching requires specialised professional development that focuses on digital pedagogy, instructional design, and the strategic use of technology for language learning. Research highlights the value of online professional development programs for non-specialist ESL teachers, particularly in improving speaking skills and online teaching effectiveness (Krajka, 2022). Studies of postgraduate online English language teacher education programs further indicate that computer-mediated communication can enhance teacher education quality in developing contexts. Optimising online teaching also requires a clear understanding of the training needs of pre-service English teachers so they can navigate virtual learning environments effectively (Gonzales, 2025). Teachers' reflections on emergency remote teaching reveal both constraints and affordances, underscoring the need for pedagogical models that can sustain online education beyond crisis contexts.

The expansion of online ESL instruction has also foregrounded concerns related to digital labor, particularly regarding working conditions and socio-economic implications for educators. Many online teaching platforms operate within the gig economy, giving rise to precarious employment arrangements, intensified workloads, and blurred work–life boundaries for language teachers (Graham et al., 2017). Research on "native speakerism" in the online English language teaching market has documented discriminatory hiring practices and highlighted the need to educate teachers about their labor rights. Similarly, studies of online English teachers' experiences in the gig economy point to persistent inequities in employment conditions and

compensation (Domingo, 2024). The feminised nature of online English teaching in the Philippines further reveals how gender, affective labour, and regulatory frameworks intersect in this sector. Together, these dynamics highlight the emotional labour involved in online teaching and the importance of examining how transnational gig-education platforms shape teachers' identities and well-being.

The demands of online ESL instruction extend beyond pedagogical challenges, affecting the psychological well-being and mental health of educators. The precarious nature of gig economy employment, coupled with intensified workloads and eroded work-life boundaries, contributes to considerable stress and emotional labor among online language teachers. These factors can lead to adverse socio-emotional impacts, which indicates the need to address the mental health challenges faced by teachers in digital learning environments and their broader implications for teaching practices (Wahab et al., 2024). Understanding these personal struggles is important for developing frameworks that support educators.

A further challenge for online ESL educators involves persistent technological and infrastructural constraints. Teachers frequently contend with unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate hardware, and limited proficiency with digital platforms, all of which can undermine instructional effectiveness. These technological difficulties form a central component of the online teaching experience, shaping lesson delivery and perceptions of professional efficacy (Meisani, 2023). Addressing such barriers is essential for fostering more equitable and effective online learning environments and for improving outcomes for both teachers and students.

To capture the lived experiences and perceptions of online ESL teachers, qualitative approaches that allow for nuanced and contextualised accounts are particularly valuable. Photovoice, a participatory action research method, has emerged as a useful tool in this regard. Grounded in Freirean pedagogy and feminist theory, photovoice enables participants to document their realities through photography and narrative, amplifying marginalised voices and supporting engagement in policy-related dialogue. During the COVID-19 pandemic, photovoice has been adapted for remote data collection to examine facilitators and barriers to online education (Doyumğaç et al., 2020). This methodology is especially well suited to exploring teachers' perceptions, experiences, and issues of equity and inclusion in evolving online contexts (CohenMiller & Izekenova, 2022). By visually representing their realities, participants can articulate challenges in ways that generate rich, authentic data not easily captured through quantitative methods alone.

The present study adopts a critical realist epistemology to examine online and home-based ESL instruction within the Philippine context. Critical realism conceptualises social activity as the outcome of interactions between

structural conditions and individual agency (Adesemowo, 2023). This perspective moves beyond surface-level description to identify deeper mechanisms shaping teachers' socio-emotional well-being, mental health, and technological experiences. Critical realism distinguishes among three ontological layers—the real, the actual, and the empirical—allowing for a systematic examination of both observable experiences and the underlying structures that generate them. From this perspective, challenges such as unreliable internet access, inadequate hardware, intensified workloads, precarious gig-based employment, and blurred work–life boundaries are not treated as individual shortcomings but as outcomes of broader socio-economic and infrastructural systems (Zhang et al., 2025). These structural conditions help explain the emotional and psychological strain experienced by Filipino educators engaged in home-based online ESL work. Photovoice complements this epistemological stance by situating individual experiences within wider social contexts and enabling underrepresented voices to contribute to policy discussions. Interpreting visual narratives through a critical realist lens allows for the identification of systemic patterns related to digital labour, teacher well-being, and technological inequality. Combined with critical realism's emphasis on reflexivity, photovoice supports an analytical approach that attends to both observable phenomena and the generative mechanisms that shape online ESL teaching in the Philippines.

Method

The study adopted Wang and Burris's (1997) photovoice design, which emphasizes participant empowerment as co-investigators (Lebioda, 2024). Photovoice is a qualitative approach in the social sciences that uses photographs as central tools for data collection and analysis, helping researchers examine how teachers make meaning of their work. Photography captures moments from the online teaching environment and makes visible teachers' perspectives and experiences. Using participant-generated visual data, guided by action research principles and photovoice procedures, the investigator engaged online and home-based English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in structured discussions using the SHOWED guide to articulate challenges and propose solutions.

Participants

The study used purposive sampling to select individuals and sites that could illuminate the central phenomenon. This nonprobability sampling technique supported the selection of information-rich cases directly relevant to the research questions, enabling a deep and contextually rich exploration of educators' experiences and strategies in online and home-based ESL instruction.

The approach intentionally selected participants who could offer specific knowledge and perspectives relevant to understanding the lived experiences of online and home-based ESL teachers.

The study included 10 participants from Argao and Sibonga in southern Cebu, Philippines. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively engaged home-based ESL teachers, employed by language schools (often as independent contractors for online platforms), and residents of the specified towns. These criteria, similar to criterion sampling, ensured direct experience with the central phenomenon: teaching English for oral and written communication to elementary learners. The diverse demographic, socioeconomic, and educational contexts of these towns enriched the study's local grounding and interpretive depth.

The selection process prioritized areas with distinct challenges and opportunities in online and home-based ESL instruction. Selecting towns with varying levels of technological access, educational resources, and cultural practices aimed to provide a more comprehensive depiction of the Philippine teaching landscape, particularly given known challenges such as insufficient technological support and limited internet access. Town selection also leveraged prior relationships with local educational institutions, which facilitated participant access and engagement.

Diverse participant demographics (e.g., age, gender, teaching experience, and educational qualifications) supported a richer exploration of perceptions and experiences in online and home-based ESL instruction. Including novice and more experienced teachers offered insight into how experience with technology and instructional methods shaped adaptation to online teaching. Participants also brought varied ESL teaching backgrounds across formal schooling, informal settings, community tutoring, and online instruction. Their educational histories, including ESL degrees and training in technology integration, provided additional perspectives on online and home-based instructional challenges, particularly those related to distance education proficiency. Home-based ESL teachers commonly used platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp for instruction, alongside other e-learning platforms and digital tools for remote teaching.

Instruments

In this photovoice study, participants captured their experiences and perspectives through photographs, conveying emotions and contexts that words alone do not fully express. The visual element therefore strengthens understanding of both the challenges and opportunities in online and home-based instruction.

To further interpret the photographs, the study used a focus group discussion guided by an interview protocol based on the SHOWED framework. The protocol was designed to empower participants by placing them at the

center of the research process and enabling them to articulate their experiences and insights. Questions aligned with the SHOWED prompts encouraged critical reflection, guiding participants to describe what they observed while also analyzing and contextualizing their realities. This process helped uncover deeper meanings behind their online and home-based ESL teaching experiences.

Data collection

Data collection followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged participant engagement. The process involved four phases, adapted from Cambaco et al. (2024): *Phase 1* began with site selection and ethical approvals. Following the photovoice design, photos were actual, orchestrated, or symbolic, and they were captured only by the study participants. AI-generated photos were not accepted as part of the study. To ensure de-identification and privacy, particularly when student faces appeared, orchestrated photos used non-real faces. Nevertheless, these visuals closely reflected participants' experiences while upholding ethical considerations. *Phase 2* commenced with participant recruitment. Participants completed a Google Form demographic questionnaire. All 10 participants collectively decided to act as photographers. Informed consent was secured, and participants, acting as co-researchers, received photovoice methodology training, including ethical considerations for third-party privacy (Ng et al., 2023). *Phase 3* encouraged participants to reflect on their online and home-based ESL experiences and capture actual, orchestrated, or symbolic images of meaningful situations or people. Participants then downloaded photos for group viewing. A debriefing followed, preparing for the focus group discussion. *Phase 4* began with the focus group discussion (FGD), involving all study members. Participants grouped their 435 photos based on conceptual similarity. This process, aligning with thematic analysis for visual data interpretation, was intended to support robust interpretation. Each photo received a numerical code for easy recall. This grouping process alone lasted eight weeks. Participants then selected three photos per group, initiating an extensive FGD.

During the discussion, participants shared the stories behind their selected photos, following the SHOWED framework. These verbal responses were audio-recorded to support interpretation of the visual data. The interpretation and coding of photographs and narratives used a thematic analysis approach, involving an iterative process of identifying codes from repeated words or phrases and grouping them into overarching themes. This process integrated visual data and participant narratives to capture nuanced experiences. For instance, participants discussed what they saw, what was happening, how

it related to their lives, why it mattered (as a strength or concern), and what could be done, guided by the SHOWED prompts.

Ultimately, participants decided to provide captions for the selected photos and to decide collectively on the emerging themes as they reflected once more on their online and home-based ESL instruction experiences. The interpretation and coding of these photographs and accompanying narratives were a collaborative effort involving 11 coders: the lead researcher and the 10 participants. Disagreements during theme formulation were resolved by revisiting the original data and participant perspectives to ensure accurate representation and consensus. This integrated approach combined visual data with participant narratives and used the SHOWED framework to support critical reflection on observations, relevance, significance, and possible solutions.

Results and Discussion

Through the analysis of 435 photos, using the SHOWED framework and the analytical process outlined by Tsang (2020), five key challenges faced by online and home-based English as a Second Language teachers were identified: the digital divide, routine risks, income instability, disciplinary distraction, and physiological challenges, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Perceived Pitfalls in the Work of Online and Home-Based ESL Teachers

Digital Divide	**Routine Risks**	**Income Instability**	**Disciplinary Distraction**	**Physiological Problem**
Unequal access to and proficiency in digital technologies, shaped by socioeconomic, geographical, and digital literacy factors.	Time management difficulties, recurring technical problems, and social isolation that undermine work–life balance and well-being.	Fluctuating income, depleted budgets, and the need for extra work due to variable enrollment, "no work, no pay" policies, and rising living costs.	Learner inattention from environmental distractions, competing responsibilities, and reduced structure and supervision in online settings.	Physical and mental health issues, including eye strain, sedentary discomfort, and sleep disturbances, linked to sustained digital work.

Figure 2 shows the generated subthemes that explain the challenges teachers face and how these build into the core themes. The *Digital Divide* includes socioeconomic constraints, power outages, and limited digital literacy. *Routine Risks* include time-management pressures, technical problems, and social isolation. *Income Instability* involves depleted budgets and the need for additional work. *Disciplinary Distraction* stems from environmental distractions, competing responsibilities, and mental overload. Finally, *Physiological Problems* include sleep disruption, vision strain, and musculoskeletal pain.

Figure 2
Sub-themes Supporting Perceived Pitfalls by Online and Home-Based ESL Teachers

Digital Divide

The digital divide, with a level of agreement of 1.0, emerged as an important thematic concern in online and home-based English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. It represents disparities in access to digital technologies, reliable internet, and essential digital skills, meaning that all 11 coders agreed on this theme. This complex issue is shaped by socioeconomic factors,

geographical limitations, power outages, and varying levels of digital literacy (van de Werfhorst et al., 2022), ultimately leading to unequal educational opportunities and outcomes. Through the SHOWED framework, participants reflected on a photograph titled economics, which symbolized the technological resources vital for online instruction. Their reflections highlighted the need for consistent digital access and proficiency, particularly noting how reliance on a single platform amplifies the divide.

As one participant, Shane, articulated, "The line that separates us from having opportunities to work and economically sustain is the digital platform and the competence to use it." This challenge is further compounded by infrastructure issues, with Nick adding, "This problem is exacerbated by scheduled and unscheduled power interruptions which clearly affect our goal of handling more classes." These firsthand accounts underscore how the digital divide directly contributes to income instability and psychosocial strain among ESL educators, revealing deeper structural mechanisms of inequality (Borowiec et al., 2021). Addressing this theme suggests the need for comprehensive policy development, digital literacy training, and flexible teaching methodologies to support more equitable access and stronger support for teachers.

Routine Risks

Routine risks, with a level of agreement of 0.81, constitute an important theme in online and home-based ESL teaching, underscoring the distinct challenges faced by educators and learners in digital environments. This theme was endorsed by 9 of the 11 coders. These risks commonly involve time management, technical difficulties, and social isolation (Palalas et al., 2022). Understanding these challenges is important for developing practices that mitigate risks and support more sustainable online ESL education. A pertinent photograph illustrated food items situated alongside electronic devices used for instructional purposes. Through the SHOWED framework, educators described routinely eating at their workstations while simultaneously preparing for upcoming sessions. This practice, driven by the need to optimize limited time and maintain operational readiness, highlighted persistent challenges in managing demanding schedules and often resulted in compromised work–life balance. Participants proposed establishing clearer boundaries between professional responsibilities and personal well-being and suggested that ESL supervisors institutionalize adequate health breaks to support sustained productivity and address these risks.

The SHOWED-guided discussion provided a more granular understanding of everyday challenges, solidifying Routine Risks as a core theme. As participants explained: "Often, we run out of time encoding results of the previous class. Thus, we take the break, eat, and prepare for the next lesson,

all at the same time" (Mark). "In my case, I really have to maximize my time. I eat and regularly check my gadgets like if my laptop is properly charged because I don't want to get caught off guard with technical issues while I'm in the middle of my online ESL class" (Zen).

Recognizing the challenges of digital education is as important as acknowledging its benefits, particularly in relation to how educators manage work–life balance within a home workspace where professional and personal lives often blur. To mitigate these routine risks, professional development, comprehensive support systems, and institutional advocacy for adequate health breaks and reasonable workload management are important.

Income Instability

Income instability, with a level of agreement of 0.90, is another recurring theme in the study of online and home-based ESL instruction experiences, reflecting economic challenges faced by educators. This indicates that 10 of the 11 coders agreed with the theme. Income instability encompasses issues such as depleted budgets, food shortages, and the need for additional work (Borowiec et al., 2021). Instructors often grapple with fluctuating incomes due to variable student enrollment and changing market demands, which can affect livelihoods and instructional quality.

The theme emerged from participant-selected photographs analyzed using the SHOWED framework. A key photograph of a teacher checking bills symbolized a depleted budget. Through photo-elicitation, participants linked this image to budgeting fluctuating income against monthly expenditures. This process highlighted underlying causes such as no work, no pay policies and minimal salaries, and it positioned extra work as an important survival strategy.

Participants described feeling like "slaves in the existing life cycle in the ESL industry," needing to "sweat and earn to catch up with their needs." They attributed this to no work, no pay policies, minimal salaries, and rising living costs. Suggested solutions included streamlining priorities, implementing appropriate taxation, and providing required benefits. Quotes reflecting this theme include: "The outcome of every income is always within the monthly cycle of bills to pay" (Tim), and "I'm a mother aside from being an ESL teacher and I am considered as the family's breadwinner. That's why it's always scary to think that my income might not be enough... So, as long as I can, I also do other extra work to sustain the needs of my family" (Dina).

Disciplinary Distraction

This theme reflects challenges faced by learners in nontraditional educational environments, where online and home-based ESL instruction includes multiple

factors that can divert attention from the learning process. These include environmental distractions, competing responsibilities, and cognitive factors. This theme obtained a level of agreement of 0.63, with 7 of the 11 coders agreeing with it. As students study from home, the absence of a structured classroom setting can increase susceptibility to distraction, which may impede learning performance. Understanding disciplinal distraction is therefore important for educators and researchers seeking strategies to enhance focus and engagement in online learning scenarios.

The interpretation of visual data, guided by the SHOWED framework, supported the analysis of images and the development of meaningful themes. For instance, one selected photo depicted a student comfortably lying in bed during an online class, prompting questions such as "What do you see here?", "What is really happening here?", and "How does this relate to our lives?". Another photograph showed a child engaged in a separate task with a sibling, illustrating the impact of competing responsibilities on focus. These analyses suggested that the absence of a structured physical classroom can lead students to prioritize comfort, which may reduce focus on classwork and weaken engagement with academic tasks (Merrill et al., 2023).

This merging of at-home experiences with academic responsibilities can cause tasks to accumulate and contribute to notable student distraction during online learning. Consequently, the analysis underscored the ongoing issue of Disciplinal Distraction. Participants suggested that teachers may need to more visibly require student presence to verify participation and that ESL supervisors should regularly monitor class progress, focusing not only on teacher engagement but also on students' behavior and active participation. As Jen noted, "Their comfort is often a primary source of distraction from properly performing their tasks in the class," and Marco added, "Siblings at home in many cases are also contributors to some online class issues."

Physiological Problems

This theme highlights the important impact of teachers' physical and mental well-being on language teaching. It gained a level of agreement of 1.0. As educators engage with digital platforms from home, various physiological challenges arise, including vision or eye strain from prolonged screen time, sedentary behavior leading to physical discomfort or musculoskeletal issues, and sleep disturbances.

The theme emerged from the analysis of a photograph depicting a pen and eyeglasses on a pile of unchecked papers. Participants interpreted this image as indicating that teachers were heavily burdened by meticulous assessment of student activities to gauge performance. This demanding work can directly affect physiological health, contributing to vision problems, eye

strain, and musculoskeletal pain due to extensive sedentary work within limited timeframes. Teachers often overburden themselves rather than streamlining tasks that are most crucial for targeted educational outcomes. As participants noted: "When fatigue comes in, sometimes it reminds us to take things easy" (Leo). "There are really times that I get tempted to sleep especially when I clearly see my bed right in front of me" (Carlt). Filipino teachers may encounter fatigue, burnout, stress, and anxiety due to demanding online pedagogy, often exacerbated by technostress and Zoom fatigue associated with prolonged screen time and increased workload.

To address these physiological issues, several strategies are important: educating teachers about the risks of prolonged screen time and sedentary behavior, alongside effective coping strategies; providing guidance on ergonomically sound home workstations; incorporating regular breaks and encouraging physical activity away from screens; and revising the ESL curriculum to streamline tasks and reduce digital workload.

Convergence or Divergence of Themes Across Analyses

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This study employed a two-stage theme generation process, reflecting a critical realist approach and photovoice methodology. Stage one involved the investigator's preliminary analysis, grounded in critical realism's attention to empirical observations and actual phenomena, to identify initial themes (Wheaton & Kreps, 2023). Stage two involved collaborative refinement with participants, drawing on photovoice's participatory nature and often guided by the SHOWED framework, to ensure the themes reflected lived experiences and helped surface deeper "real" generative mechanisms.

Convergence or divergence of themes across analyses refers to systematically comparing themes identified from different sources or stages to understand a phenomenon. This comparative approach synthesizes findings, particularly in complex fields such as education (Drisko, 2019). Theme convergence indicates consistent patterns or shared experiences, such as recurring physiological problems and technostress in online education. Divergence highlights unique or context-specific findings that may warrant further investigation, drawing attention to nuances for particular groups, such as Filipino teachers in online ESL instruction. Mapping these thematic relationships provides a clearer understanding of issues, supports validation of findings, identifies knowledge gaps, and informs targeted interventions to support teacher well-being and pedagogical effectiveness in digital learning contexts.

Table 1 outlines preliminary themes derived from online and home-based ESL teachers' experiences. These initially included technological constraints

(e.g., poor internet, device shortages, inadequate support), wage issues (e.g., unfair compensation, low wages), learner provocations (e.g., student absence, communication or engagement problems), work-related health problems, and work–life balance challenges (e.g., difficulties integrating work, family, and personal life).

Table 1

Converging or Diverging of Themes Across Analyses

Investigator's Analysis	Participants' Refined Themes	Core Themes
Technological constraints	Sedentary lifestyle and screen fatigue, slow internet connection	Digital divide, physiological problems
Wage issues	Financial mismanagement and poor budgetary control	Income instability
Learner provocations	Virtual instruction's impact on learner conduct	Disciplinal distraction
Work-related health problems	Sedentary lifestyle and screen fatigue	Physiological problems
Work-life balance	Multitasking and work suppleness, sedentary lifestyle and screen fatigue	Routine risks, physiological problems

These preliminary themes were collaboratively refined by participants, acting as co-investigators, through the participatory photovoice methodology and the SHOWED framework (Krebs et al., 2024). This process, often prompted by photographs, supported an authentic reflection of lived experiences and resulted in five core themes. For instance, initial observations on work-related health problems and aspects of work–life balance evolved into *sedentary lifestyle and screen fatigue*. Participant discussions linked heavy workloads and prolonged screen time to ailments such as vision problems, eye strain, and musculoskeletal pain, contributing to the core theme of physiological problems. Similarly, *learner provocations* was refined into *virtual instruction's impact on learner conduct*. Images depicting disengaged students highlighted how unstructured environments can foster disengagement, leading to the core theme of disciplinary distraction. In contrast, *wage issues* was refined into *financial mismanagement and poor budgetary control*, connecting challenges such as budgeting fluctuating income and *no work, no pay* policies to the core theme of income instability (Zelma, 2024). Concerns about work–life balance were also articulated as *multitasking and work suppleness*, revealed through discussions of educators who routinely consumed meals without disengaging from their workstations, contributing to the core theme of routine risks. Finally, *technological constraints* was refined into *slow internet connection*,

as participants highlighted problems such as internet interruptions (Zilka et al., 2021). This underscored how unstable internet connections and poor working conditions contribute to teachers' difficulties, supporting the core theme of the digital divide by illustrating the imbalance created by limited internet access and outdated digital technologies. The SHOWED framework supported participants' direct interpretation of the data, grounding the themes in their shared experiences.
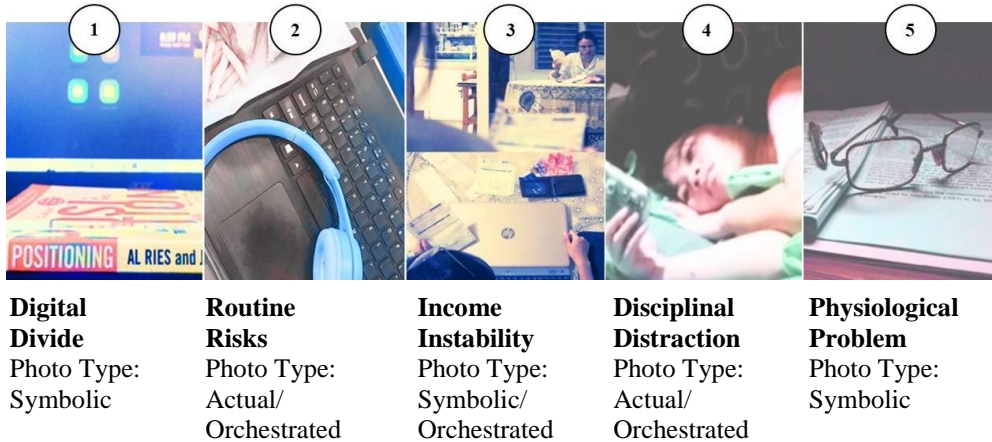
The five core themes—digital divide, routine risks, income instability, disciplinary distraction, and physiological problems—were thus derived by integrating the investigator's preliminary analysis with themes collaboratively refined by participants. This collaborative, experience-grounded process provided a strong account of the challenges faced by online ESL teachers. These themes are not isolated. Rather, they form an interconnected set of pressures. The digital divide, characterized by unstable internet and outdated technology (Sato et al., 2022), can exacerbate routine risks such as heavy workloads and blurred work–life boundaries as teachers work around inefficient tools. Prolonged screen time and stress associated with these routine risks can then contribute to physiological problems such as vision strain and musculoskeletal pain (Dewangan et al., 2024). Income instability, arising from factors such as fluctuating pay, may compel teachers to take on additional work, which intensifies routine risks and can reduce their capacity to manage virtual classrooms effectively, thereby contributing to disciplinary distraction. Viewed through a critical realist lens, these interconnected challenges are not only observable experiences but also expressions of deeper generative mechanisms within the online ESL teaching ecosystem. In this sense, constraints in one area can cascade into others, diminishing teacher well-being and pedagogical effectiveness.

How Photo Types Differently Surfaced within the Photovoice/SHOWED Procedure

In the photovoice methodology, guided by the SHOWED framework, photographs serve as pivotal data points through which participants articulate and interpret lived experiences (Farkić & Kennell, 2021). Participants used diverse photographic approaches—from direct representations to symbolic imagery—reflecting their subjective worldviews. This collaborative analysis of visual narratives, integrating investigator observations and participant interpretations, was instrumental in refining the core themes. The process generated tangible insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by online ESL teachers. Figure 3 presents an example photograph for each pitfall, along with its identified photo type.

Figure 3

Photo Types Surfacing in the Photovoice/SHOWED Procedure

Digital Divide	Routine Risks	Income Instability	Disciplinal Distraction	Physiological Problem
Photo Type: Symbolic	Photo Type: Actual/ Orchestrated	Photo Type: Symbolic/ Orchestrated	Photo Type: Actual/ Orchestrated	Photo Type: Symbolic

The SHOWED framework, central to photovoice, structured participants' translation of visual observations into critical reflections, articulating lived experiences as specific pitfalls (Tsang, 2020). This collaborative inquiry grounded themes in collective realities.

The digital divide, evolving from technological constraints, was clarified by a symbolic economics photograph. This image highlighted the marked imbalance caused by poor internet access and outdated digital technologies (Sato et al., 2022), framing limited access as a systemic barrier. Routine risks emerged from visuals such as food items situated alongside electronic devices, prompting reflections on work encroaching on personal time as educators routinely consumed meals without disengaging from their workstations. Income instability surfaced from a teacher checking bills and money photograph, symbolizing financial precarity. The SHOWED framework helped participants link visuals to challenges such as budgeting fluctuating income and no work, no pay policies (Lopes & Dewan, 2015). For disciplinary distraction, images of students comfortably lying in bed provided tangible evidence of disengagement. SHOWED facilitated reflection on learner provocations, clarifying how unstructured environments foster distraction and affect remote classroom management. Finally, physiological problems were highlighted by a symbolic photograph of a pen and eyeglasses on unchecked papers, representing heavy workload. Participants connected this visual to vision problems, eye strain, and musculoskeletal pain (Dewangan et al., 2024) associated with prolonged screen time. Overall, this reflection-driven process, structured by SHOWED and diverse photo types, deepened initial observations into analytically coherent themes by linking visual narratives to articulated lived challenges.

Implications for ESL Provider Operations

Understanding these challenges is important for ESL providers seeking to develop targeted interventions that enhance teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness. This requires moving beyond surface-level observations to address systemic issues within the online teaching environment, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Implications for ESL Provider Operations

Perceived Pitfalls	Implications
Digital Divide	Policy and Infrastructure, Digital Literacy and Skills Training, Flexible Methods
Routine Risks	Work-life Balance Policies; Professional Development; Support Systems
Income Instability	Fair Compensation, Financial Literacy, Policy Advocacy
Disciplinal Distraction	Teacher Strategies, Supervisory Monitoring
Physiological Problems	Awareness and Education, Ergonomic Support, Curriculum Review

The digital divide, initially framed as *technological constraints*, stems from economic and policy structures. Addressing it requires policy and infrastructure investment for more equitable technology access and connectivity, including public policies on connection speeds and digital resilience (Drljić et al., 2025). Prioritizing community technology centers, subsidized internet, and affordable devices is important. Enhancing digital literacy and pedagogical skills for online English as a Second Language teachers is also important through training on device proficiency, online platforms, content development, and technology integration. Continuous professional development and flexible teaching methods remain important for adapting to evolving digital learning and supporting more equitable outcomes.

Routine risks, such as blurred work–life boundaries, arise from intense workload demands and insufficient organizational support in online teaching. Clear work–life balance policies are important for instructors, who often face demanding roles that lower satisfaction and increase workloads (Rahman et al., 2024). Professional development should equip teachers with strategies for managing these risks, fostering resilience and healthy boundaries. Comprehensive support systems are important for mitigating mental health challenges and burnout, particularly where limited social and organizational support exacerbates these issues. Supervisors can promote healthier boundaries through consistent instrumental support.

Income instability, highlighted by financial precarity, reflects gig-economy conditions and insufficient labor protections in the English language teaching sector. Fair compensation models are needed to address low wages and unpaid hours that undermine financial stability. Equitable employment and fair remuneration are important (Domingo, 2024). Financial literacy training can help educators manage fluctuating incomes. Policy advocacy is also important, including labor law reforms for platform work and collective bargaining rights.

Disciplinary distraction, observed through student disengagement, is generated by unstructured online learning environments. Educators need strategies to minimize distraction in online English as a Second Language classes, such as stronger instructor presence, clear pacing, interactive materials, gamification, and shorter sessions with breaks (Lee et al., 2023). Establishing strong faculty presence and fostering a *community of attention* are key aims. Effective supervisory monitoring practices are important for maintaining engagement and adapting teaching activities to support virtual classroom success.

Physiological problems, such as eye strain and musculoskeletal pain, emerge from prolonged screen time and sedentary routines, amplified by limited ergonomic support and unadapted curricula (Dewangan et al., 2024). Educational institutions should implement awareness and education programs on excessive screen time. Providing ergonomic support is also important, given the links between prolonged computer use and musculoskeletal disorders. Self-assessment tools for home workstation setup and posture guidance can help reduce symptoms. Curriculum review is needed to integrate practices that mitigate physiological risks, including structured screen-time guidelines, regular breaks, and physical activity.

Conclusion

This study examined the multifaceted challenges of online English as a Second Language teachers, moving beyond surface-level observations to identify systemic elements—structural, pedagogical, and institutional—that shape teacher effectiveness and well-being. Using a critical realist lens, the study aimed to uncover underlying causal mechanisms generating these difficulties rather than attributing them solely to individual teacher skill or isolated incidents. It addressed key questions about (a) challenges perceived by online and home-based English as a Second Language teachers in Southern Cebu, (b) how these were analyzed from participant and investigator perspectives, (c) how photographic evidence surfaced these issues, and (d) implications for provider operations in the Philippine context. Five primary challenges were identified, each interpreted in relation to its broader significance and systemic

roots, emerging from participants' experiences and depicted through actual, orchestrated, and symbolic photographs within a photovoice/SHOWED procedure, alongside the investigator's analysis.

First, the digital divide extends beyond technological constraints, reflecting deeper economic and policy structures that perpetuate educational inequality through unequal access to technology and infrastructure, including inadequate public policy for connection speeds and digital resilience. This underscores the need for ongoing evaluation and enhanced digital and teaching proficiencies for educators. For providers, addressing this involves policy and infrastructure investment for equitable access, prioritizing community technology centers and subsidized internet, and strengthening digital literacy and pedagogical skills through continuous professional development and flexible methods. Second, routine risks, characterized by blurred work–life boundaries, stem from intense workload demands and insufficient organizational support in online teaching. These risks expose weaknesses in designing sustainable work models, contributing to reduced job satisfaction and increased burnout. Providers should implement clear work–life balance policies, offer professional development for risk management, and establish comprehensive support systems to mitigate mental health challenges and burnout, with supervisors promoting healthy boundaries.

Third, income instability is linked to gig-economy precarity and weak labor protections in the English language teaching sector. This highlights how broader economic trends and limited policy advocacy create financial precarity, encourage multiple jobs, and undermine retention. Implications for providers include fair compensation models, equitable employment, financial literacy training, and policy advocacy for labor law reforms and collective bargaining rights.

Fourth, disciplinary distraction, manifested as student disengagement, is generated by unstructured online learning environments. Its significance lies in how pedagogical and institutional design choices contribute to the absence of a *community of attention*. Providers should equip educators with strategies such as stronger instructor presence, clear pacing, interactive materials, gamification, shorter sessions with breaks, and effective supervisory monitoring to sustain engagement.

Finally, physiological problems, such as eye strain and musculoskeletal pain, arise from prolonged screen time and sedentary routines, amplified by limited ergonomic support and unadapted curricula. This points to gaps in institutional responsibility. Providers should implement awareness programs on excessive screen time, offer ergonomic support (including self-assessment tools and posture guidance), and review curricula to integrate practices that mitigate physiological risk.

This study contributes to understanding online English as a Second Language teaching by identifying challenges as products of underlying, often less visible, systemic mechanisms. Using a critical realist lens, it traces generative causes and offers direction for multi-layered responses. Teacher effectiveness and well-being are closely tied to broader socioeconomic and institutional contexts. To cultivate a more resilient, fair, and effective online learning environment, institutions and policymakers should strengthen digital infrastructure, promote work–life balance, ensure fair compensation, improve pedagogical design, and prioritize ergonomic health.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, while offering rich insights into the lived experiences of online and home-based ESL teachers, is subject to several limitations that impact the generalizability and scope of its findings. The primary limitation stems from its small, localized sample, comprising only ten participants from two towns in Southern Cebu. This specific demographic and geographic focus mean the findings may not be directly transferable to broader Philippine contexts or international settings, especially given the unique labor, infrastructural, and cultural conditions prevalent in the online ESL industry in the Philippines. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported and participatory data through the Photovoice methodology, where participants visually document and interpret their realities, introduces the possibility of selective emphasis or self-censorship. While photovoice empowers participants, certain experiences may be difficult to capture visually, and ethical restrictions could further limit representation. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of this research captures experiences at a single point in time, thereby precluding an understanding of how challenges, such as burnout or income instability, evolve longitudinally. Lastly, the exclusive focus on teachers indicated that the valuable perspectives of students, administrators, or platform providers were not included, offering only a partial view of the complex ecosystem of online ESL instruction.

Building upon the foundational insights generated by this study, future research can expand in several logical directions to address the identified limitations and deepen our understanding of online and home-based ESL instruction. Larger and comparative studies are warranted, encompassing broader regions within the Philippines or engaging in cross-national comparisons to explore how online ESL labor conditions differ across diverse contexts. Longitudinal research would be invaluable for tracking the progression of teacher well-being, income stability, or health outcomes over extended periods, offering dynamic insights into the impact of online teaching. Incorporating multi-stakeholder perspectives, including those of students, supervisors, platform managers, or policymakers, would provide a more comprehensive

understanding of the challenges and potential solutions within the online ESL ecosystem. Future studies could also employ mixed-method extensions, combining Photovoice with quantitative approaches such as surveys, physiological measures, or workload tracking, to offer a more robust and triangulated analysis. Finally, intervention-focused research testing policy changes, workload reforms, ergonomic interventions, or digital support programs, alongside platform-specific analyses examining how different gig-education platforms shape labor conditions, would directly inform evidence-based policy and practice aimed at improving the professional lives of online ESL teachers.

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