

INVESTIGATING FACTORS HINDERING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG GRADES 1–10 STUDENTS DESPITE ENGLISH AS A COMPULSORY SUBJECT IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

English has been taught as compulsory subject in the country, the study investigated the factors hindering English language proficiency among Grade 1 to 10 students in district Islamabad, Pakistan. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were gathered from ten schools of the city (five public and five private) through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of students' creative piece of writing samples. The study grounded on Gass and Selinker's Error Analysis Model and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to identify instructional, contextual, and socio-economic barriers to English language acquisition. The study findings reveal that both public and private school students exhibit below average proficiency, with public school students mainly struggling with foundational literary skills whereas private schools showing over-reliance on the rote-memorization. Key challenges of the study include teacher-centered pedagogy, limited formative feedbacks from teacher and caregivers, excessive reliance on L1 such Urdu, Pothwari, and Pushto, insufficient remedial instruction, lack of exposure to authentic English language, socio-economic and motivational constraints, and finally rigid examination systems prioritizing grammar over communicative competence. The research also underscores the need for curriculum reform, increased the instructor training, diagnostic assessments, and student-centered instructional practices. The local findings within the global English language teaching challenges, the study provides practical recommendations for policymaker, curriculum developers and educators aiming to fill the gap between compulsory English subject instruction and functional language speaking and writing proficiency.

Keywords:

English Language Proficiency, Error Analysis, Socio-cultural Theory, Communicative Competence, Public and Private Schools, Language Teaching

1.1 Introduction

English language writing and speaking proficiency essential in a globalized world where communication, education and career opportunities often depend on competence in English. Recognizing this importance of English, many education systems including those in non-native countries, have made English as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary school level. The objective of such policies is to ensure students develop English language functional fluency by the time they complete their basic level education. However, there is observed a significant gap between policy intentions and actual students learning outcomes. Despite years of English as compulsory instruction from Grades 1-10, many students struggle to attain adequate English language writing and speaking proficiency, highlighting the presence of deeper, structural challenges that need to be investigated. This study emphasizes exploring the factors that hinder the development of English language proficiency among basic level students, despite English being a compulsory subject. According to a study Kirkpatrick (2010) these challenging factors may integrate effective teaching methods, lack of exposure to speak, insufficient teacher-student classroom interaction, lack of resources, and sociolinguistic constraints such as mother tongue use and societal attitude towards English language. Understanding these challenges is crucial because English language proficiency not only increases academic success but also plays a significant role in social mobility, employability, and higher education access.

The disparity between English as a compulsory subject and low writing and speaking proficiency highlights that the issue is not merely about the existing curriculum, but also the content quality implementation. Another study of Richards (2015), in many schools of the non-native countries, English instruction often focuses on Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) and grammar translation method (GTM) over communicative competence. This outdated pedagogical methods fail to achieve advance level practical skills, students need for real life interaction and academic performance. Furthermore, large class sizes, limited teacher training, lack of language interactions, and exam-oriented teaching approaches contribute to ineffective language acquisition. Additionally, socio-economic and environmental factors also play important role in students language learning outcomes. In many under-resourced schools, particularly in backward areas, students have no access to English outside the classroom settings. Their exposure to the language restricted to curriculum and teacher interactions, which mainly grammatically constrained and non-fluent. Moreover, the lack of language speaking settings outside classroom such as home or in the community means students rarely get the chance to practice language in meaningful ways (Rahman, 2004). This lack of reinforcement outside the classrooms, students get fluency and confidence, especially in the context of language speaking and writing. Along with that, another concerning aspects are the proficiency level and pedagogical competence of English language teachers themselves. In many cases, particularly at the primary and lower secondary levels, teachers many not carrying the required language abilities or contemporary teaching strategies needed to improve students' fluency. They are mainly focuses on traditional teaching approached through which they fail to provide student-centered interactive activities. Additionally, limited professional development opportunities mean that many teachers are not well trained in updated communicative language teaching approaches that align with international standard of language teaching (Richards, 2015).

This study is grounded in a multidimensional investigation into instructional, contextual and sociocultural barriers which can provide a valuable insight into why English education is not translating into expected levels of students speaking and writing proficiency. The study focusing on students from Grade 1-10, which covers the foundational and translational approaches of language development. Further the study findings are intended to inform educational stakeholders such as, policymakers, administrators, and language instructors about specific fields that need intervention, ranging from curriculum designers and teacher training to classroom practice.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The study *Investigating Factors Hindering English Language Proficiency Among Grades 1-10 Students Despite English as a Compulsory Subject*, is significant in the context of language education and policy evaluation. Despite English language is being taught as a compulsory instruction in schools, but a large portion of students fail to attain basic proficiency in writing and speaking skills. This gap of study not only hinders the students' academic performance but also hinders access to higher education employment, and global communication opportunities. By identifying these causes such as ineffective teaching practices, lack of teachers training, insufficient exposure, and sociolinguistic barriers, can inform instructors, curriculum developers and policymakers. Moreover, the study is important in multilingual and postcolonial settings where English language serves as a second or foreign language. Emphasizing on students from Grade 1-10, the study captures a critical developmental stage during which language foundation are established. Finally, it contributes to the broader educational discourse on English Language Teaching by contextualizing local challenges within global education trends (Richards, 2015). The study also provides empirical

insights for future scholars as a baseline for comparative researches across different schooling systems or regions.

1.3 Research Problem

Despite English being a compulsory subject in Pakistan, students from Grade 1-10 often struggle to attain proficiency in writing and speaking skills. This study gap between teaching and language competence poses a significant challenge for educational stakeholders, particularly in non-native English countries, where English is taught as a second or foreign language. There are multiple factors that are responsible for these challenges such as ineffective teaching approaches, lack of language-rich environments, ineffective classroom interaction, and limited resources contribute to this persistent issue. Furthermore, educational system in the country at Grade 1-10 mainly focuses on rote memorization over communicative competence often results in poor practical language proficiency. The problem of writing and speaking aggravated in overcrowded classrooms setting, where individualized instruction is rarely possible. Thus, students may pass exams without developing functional fluency in English language. Understanding these language writing and speaking skills' barriers are essential for formulating instructional and policymaking strategies that bridge the existing gap. The success of language teaching mainly depends on contextual adaptation and instructional alignment with learners' needs (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To examine the perceptions of language instructors regarding the challenges of students English writing and speaking proficiency.
2. To identify the contextual, instructional, and systemic factors that contribute to students' lack of English language proficiency despite English as a compulsory subject.

2.1 Literature Review

Globally English has resultantly adopted as a second or foreign language in numerous educational systems, including those where English is a non-native language. Despite English is being taught as compulsory subject form Grade 1-10, many students fail to achieve fluency in writing and speaking. Rahman (2005) and Coleman (2010), these studies suggests that researchers attributed this discrepancy to a variety of educational, sociolinguistic, and systematic factors. One major issue lies in the disparity between policymaking and practice. While governments have made English language instruction as a compulsory, but the implementation often lacks uniform standards, especially in under-resourced and rural schools setting (Shamim, 2011). Instructors may themselves have limited English language proficiency, which hinders their skill to deliver effective instruction (Hayes, 2010). Additionally, a focus on GTM and CLT, continues to dominate classrooms, resulting in limited English proficiency in speaking and writing practice (Richards, 2006). These outdated teaching methods deprive students of the interactive, task-based environment required for productive skills development. Another significant barrier to English language proficiency is the mismatch between curriculum design and real-world language usage. English textbooks are often designed with an urban, middle-class student in mind by the curriculum developers, where there are diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the learners, particularly in rural and marginalized communities' settings (Mahboob, 2009). Additionally, examination system is many under-developing countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, focuses on rote memorization and writing grammar exercises over language functional usage, thereby discouraging students from engaging in a meaningful way (Manan et al., 2015). Further studies highlight that when language learning is mainly focusing on examination, students struggle to transfer skills from controlled, academic settings to real-life communication scenarios (Kam, 2014). In such contexts, English field is more of a subject to than a language in practical use.

A study by Shamim & Kuchah (2016) indicates, as a result, students remain passive recipient of knowledge rather than active users of the language learning. This existing gap between curriculum objectives and pedagogical realities significantly limits the proficiency of English speaking and writing competencies.

Caregivers and environmental factors play significant impact of students' English proficiency development. According to Butler & Le (2003), students from backgrounds where English is not spoken and caregivers are illiterate or less educated, receive limited fluency of language acquisition outside the classrooms. Additionally, socio-economic status also play an important role in determining access to quality education, private tutoring and supplementary resources such as textbooks or digital media tools (Brock-Utne, 2000). The students of lower income households often attend government funded public schools, in the schools, the class sizes are large, teacher training is limited, and language lab and technological facilities are completely absent (Rahman, 2005). Moreover, a lack of English language environments such as libraries, media and peer interactions, reduces lack of opportunities for language learning (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Without these external supports, students struggle to achieve classroom learning, especially in productive skills such as writing and speaking. Furthermore, the lack of encourage or fear of making mistaking in speaking or writing, such environment further stifles learners' confidence and motivation (Krashen, 1985).

Finally, teachers' professional development and attitude toward language teaching are important determinants of students' outcomes. A study conducted by Farrell (2012) shows that well-trained and professionally enriched instructors can significantly increase English language learnings of the students. However, further studies highlights that in many contexts where English subject is taught as a compulsory, teacher training and professional training remains inadequate, especially concerning the teaching of students' speaking and writing proficiency (Shamim, 2011). Study by Aziz et al. (2018) emphasizes that English instructors often rely on lecture-based delivery approaches, driven by textbook coverage rather than learner engagement. Additionally, many instructors experience anxiety about their own linguistic competence, which translate into reduced classroom opportunities for English spoken interaction or free writing abilities (Canagarajah, 1999). Also, the high-stakes nature of examination pressures teachers to 'teach to the test' which marginalizes communicative competence in favour of language grammar practices and structured creative writing such as essays (Rahman & Singh, 2020). Thus, students may acquire passive vocabulary and reading skills but remain unable to express themselves efficient in writing and speaking English language.

3.1 Research Methodology

The research methodology section explores the factors affecting English language writing and speaking proficiency among the learners in Grades 1-10 in the Islamabad region. The study is grounded in qualitative method approach, focusing on rich narrative insights over numerical generalization. The study primary tools integrate semi structured interviews, classroom observations, and written document analysis. The study aims to uncover contextual barriers to effective language acquisition, especially in the light of English as a compulsory subject instruction.

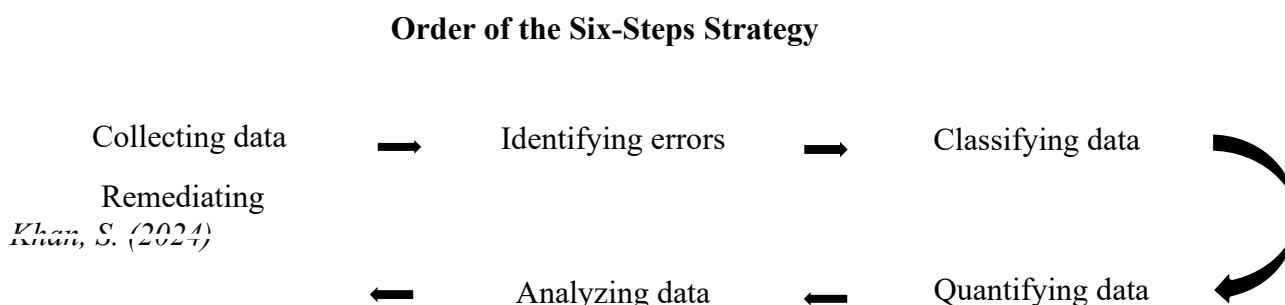
3.2 Theoretical Framework

The current study is drawing upon Gass and Selinker's (2008) model of error analysis, which provides a structural for identifying, categorizing, and addressing language learning issues. According to the model, language proficiency challenges can be analyzed in six steps:

- i. Collecting Data
- ii. Identifying errors

- iii. Classifying errors
- iv. Quantifying errors
- v. Analyzing potential source of errors, and
- vi. Providing pedagogical remedies.

Figure 3.



Gass and Selinker model enables the scholars to trace the language errors back to their cognitive, social, instructional roots and purpose actionable teaching practices.

In addition to model of error analysis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory VST (1978) underpins the study's interpretation of how social interactions within the classroom settings, especially the role of alternative strategies of peer collaboration and teacher scaffolding, influence language learning acquisition. Language development is observed as a socially mediated process, where cognitive development occurs in the Zone of Proximal Development through instructor guided support. This theoretical lens is relevant for investigating differences in English language outcomes between government and private schools, where instructional style and peer dynamics often differ.

3.3 Research Design

The study adopted qualitative research design to explore variation in English language proficiency challenges among the students of grade 1 to 10 schools. The sample size for the study adopted 10 schools, 5 public and 5 private schools, 10 student students from each school in district Islamabad. Each school of the selected population portrays a distinct case. This research approach reveals in-depth comparison between institution types to capture systemic, educational, and socio-economic status factors impacting English language proficiency.

3.4 Study Population and Sampling

The research population integrate students and English language teachers from 5 public and 5 private school in district Islamabad. The research adopted purposive sampling to select schools representing diverse socio-economic background and English instruction practices. Within each school of population, three English teachers and 1 to 10 grade students, 10 students from each school, to ensure the variation in their academic performance and gender balance. Furthermore, institutional consent was obtained prior to data collection.

3.5 Data Collection Process

Both teachers and students' data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structural interviews and student creative writing samples out of the school English curricula. Additionally, these observations focused on teaching strategies, students' engagement, and use of L1 versus L2 in classrooms setting. Moreover, the semi-structure interviews explored perceived barriers to English language proficiency, instructional challenges, and students' attitudes toward English language learning.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis process carried out by transcribed and analyzed thematically using content analysis. Codes and categories were developed based on recurring patterns related to Order of Six Stage strategy error types, teaching gaps, and socio-cultural constraints.

Furthermore, these themes were later organized in alignment with the theoretical models guiding the study, offer both micro level insight of linguistic and macro-level of policy implementations.

4.1 Data Analysis

The current study investigate variation in students' proficiency challenges among Grade 1 to 10 students from public and private school in district Islamabad. The qualitative study design allowed an in-depth examination of the systemic, institutional, and socio-economic factors contributing to the students' English language proficiency, where they were found to be below average. Through thematic and student creative piece of writing content analysis, recurring patterns in teaching practices, students' engagement, social class factors, and linguistic errors were identified. This section of the study analyzes the data collected through classroom observation, English teachers semi-structure interviews and students' creative writing samples.

4.2 Participant Performance

Across the ten schools, five public sector and five private schools, the majority of the participant demonstrate below average English language proficiency. the study findings was consistent across all grades 1 to 10, with early grade students (1 to 5) struggling with foundational English skills; such as phonic, word recognition, basic sentence structure and simple level translations from Urdu to English. Similarly, the higher-grade students (6 to 10) displaying weaknesses in grammatical accuracy, vocabulary level, and cohesion and coherence in written expression. When their language performance analyzed comparatively, the students from public school setting, particularly from lower social class and socio-economic background, indicated significant gaps in reading comprehension passages, spelling, and speaking skills compared to private school students' counterparts. In contrast the private school students were not free from concerns; such as several students from these institutions also displayed weak critical thinking abilities, over-reliance on rote memorization, and limited ability to apply English communication outside classroom setting.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

The study thematic followed the coding procedure outlined the research methodology section, grounding into six broad themes derived from the observed and reported challenges:

- a) Basic literary deficiencies
- b) Teaching methodology gaps
- c) Exclusive reliance on L1 (regional languages, particularly Urdu in Islamabad educational setting)
- d) Socio-economic and guardian support factors
- e) Motivational constraints
- f) Systemic shortcomings

4.3.1 Basic Literacy deficiencies

A periodic observation across public and private schools was inadequate basic skills, particularly among grade 1 to 5 classes. In public schools, this often manifested as inability to correctly identify or pronounce basic phonemes of English language, confusion between similar consonant alphabet phonemes such as /p/ and /b/, /k/ and /g/, and incorrect word spacing. Similarly, the students' creative piece of writing revealed frequent spelling errors and inappropriate sentences, highlighting a lack of early phonic-base instruction. In contrast, whereas in private schools setting, while phonics instruction was relatively stronger, writing pieces shown formulaic guided sentences and patterns with minimal variety in moderate level vocabulary. Furthermore, many higher grades (6 to 10) students displayed syntactic fossilization process, repeating the same grammatical structures without any learning progress. Finally, teachers' interviews revealed these issues to time constraints in curriculum coverage

and the absence of remedial instruction support for struggling learners. In conclusion, both school types, this study highlights that once students fell behind on their early school grades, there were limited mechanisms to bridge the gap.

4.2.2 Teaching Methodology Gaps

Classroom observations revealed notable differences in teaching styles between public and private schools, but both had instructional methodological limitations affecting below average students. In public schools, teaching was primarily instructor-centered, with primary focus on lecture-based explanation and choral repetition. This approach left weaker students passive and disengaged. There was little use of scaffolding teaching techniques or differentiated instruction to cater to diverse proficiency levels. Whereas in private schools, while integrating more group-based activities and textbook exercises, mainly adopted exam-oriented teaching strategies. Students at private schools were trained to rote memorize model answers without understanding their language concepts. Furthermore, for below average students, this rote-based approach restricted genuine language acquisition and problem-solving skills.

The researcher has observed a common methodological gap was limited formative feedback. In both types of school systems, feedback was often corrective rather than constructive, focusing on demonstrating out errors instead of guiding students through the process of self-correctness.

4.2.3 Exclusive reliance on L1

In public school setting, the use of Urdu or other regional language such as Pashto and Pothohari dominated classroom interaction, with English reserved mainly for reading of the lesson text from textbook aloud. Instructors often translated text content into first language L1, thereby reducing students' exposure to authentic English language input. Thus, the learners were hesitant to speak English with fluency, fearing mistake and ridicule. In contrast, the students from private schools maintained a relatively higher use of English language proficiency during formal lessons, but informal interaction between students, and even between teachers and weaker students the researcher has observed there was often switched to L1. Additionally, below average students, in particular, relied heavily on L1 for reading comprehension exercises and communication, indicating low level of confidence in English usage. This reliance on L1 hindered the development of students' listening and speaking abilities, which was evident to oral assessments where students struggled with based conversational exchanges.

4.2.4 Socio-economic and guardian support factors

The socio-economic background of students played a significant role in shaping their English language proficiency. The students from public school setting, largely come from low-income families, often lacked access to additional and supplementary learning resources such as storybooks, digital learning tools, or private home and academies tuition. Guardian involvement in homework and language skill practice was minimal, as many caregivers themselves lacked English language literacy skills. Contrary, the private school students, while generally from more socio-economically stable classes, also faced gaps in caregiver engagement. Interviews observation shows that priorities grades over communicative competence, pressuring children to prepare for examinations rather than motivating them to explore English language proficiency for daily life. Additionally, teachers from both the sector settings, highlighted that students who had already exposure to English at their home or through pre-schooling entered Grade 1 with a clear proficiency advantage. Conversely, students with lack or no prior English language proficiency faced an uphill struggle throughout their school from Grade 1 to 10.

4.2.5 Motivational constraints

Researcher observation notes indicated that below average students often exhibited low motivation toward English learning. This was particularly evident during students' creative piece of writing tasks, where weaker students produced minimal work and highlighted reluctance to participate in lesson reading aloud. Whereas teacher interviews confirmed that these students frequently expressed anxiety about making mistakes, which further demotivated active classroom engagement.

In public schools setting, English language was often perceived as a foreign language, unrelated to students' daily lives. This perception of the students about English language limited their intrinsic motivation to learn it. In private schools setting, while students acknowledged the significance of English language for academic and career success, weaker learners felt a sense of linguistic inferiority in this schooling setting to their higher-performing peers.

The process of motivation was also associated to instructional strategies; students in classrooms with interactive, motivating teachers displayed more willingness to take risk with English, even though the accuracy level was low.

4.2.6 Systemic shortcomings

At the macro level of the study, the researcher has observed systemic factors exacerbated below average students' performance. Public school students faced chronic shortcoming of trained English language teacher, larger classroom sizes, and outdated course content with limited cultural and traditional relevance. Lesson pacing was dictated by curriculum coverage requirements rather than mastery learning, leaving students' language proficiency struggling behind. On other hand, private schools, while better resource equipped, were constrained by rigid examination systems that focuses on grammar and rote learning over the students' communicative competence. Instructor admitted that their lesson plans were driven by exam preparation needs, with little room for creativity, analytical skills, and student-centered approaches. Moreover, there was no formal mechanism for diagnostic assessment in either school type to identify and address early age learning difficulties in English language proficiency. Without targeted interventions, these early schooling gaps persisted and compounded over time.

4.3 Patterns in Creative Writing Samples

By analyzing the students' creative writing underscored several linguistic weaknesses consistent with classroom observation and instructor reports in both type of schools. The following are the common patterns among below average students such as;

- a) Frequent grammatical errors, like subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and article usages.
- b) Limited vocabulary approach.
- c) Repetitive sentence structures, short sentences, such as lacking connectors and transitional devices.
- d) Omission of basic SVO sentence components, this observation of the researcher demonstrating gaps in syntactic awareness.
- e) The students also found by using memorized phrases rather than original sentence construction.

Further, the study found interestingly, private school students attempted more complex sentences, their accuracy rate was not prominent than that of public-school peers. Whereas public school students, however, wrote significantly fewer sentences overall, reflecting lower English language writing fluency.

4.4 Teachers' Perspectives on Below Average Students Performance

Teachers interview observations consistently identified the following barriers for struggling students:

- a) Large learning gaps from early grades (1 to 5) that were never addressed.
- b) Lack of remedial classes or specialized language support from the instructors.
- c) Caregiver disinterest or inability to support English learning at home.
- d) Fear of ridicule among peers, leading to students' low classroom participation.
- e) Finally, overcrowded classrooms and administrative workload reducing teachers' capacity to give individual attention.

Theses study findings underscores that the below average performance among Grade 1 to 10 in district Islamabad is not only a product of individual learning abilities. These challenges are also the outcome of interconnected instructional, socio-economic, attitudinal and more significantly systemic factors. By addressing these challenges will require coordinated efforts at both classroom and policy levels, ensuring the students' struggle are not left behind in their language learning proficiency journey.

5.1 Conclusion

The conclusion persistent deficiencies in English language proficiency among Grades 1 to 10 students in Islamabad, stem from deeply embedded instructional, socio-economic, and systemic factors rather than individual student shortcomings. Public school face acute shortage of trained teachers, inadequate language study resources, and overcrowded classrooms, while provide schools, despite better facilities equipped, remain constrained by examination-oriented approaches and rote memorization practices. Furthermore, across both schools setting, limited opportunities for authentic English use, reliance on L1, minimal formative feedback, and lack of remedial interventions which prevent English language students from developing functional fluency. The research findings highlight the need for educational reforms that align teaching practices with communicative with communicative language goals, integrate early diagnostic assessments, and promote sustained professional development for teachers. Addressing these language proficiency barriers through coordinated classroom, institutional and policy-level intervention for ensuring that English as a compulsory education translate into tangible communicative competence, equipping students with the essential skills for academic and career achievement in a globalized world.

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