LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT
This research investigates the learning difficulties faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) at primary schools in Punjab. The research is qualitative, with semi structured interviews with teachers and students, used as research tool for data collection. A thematic analysis was performed in which important themes were generated following the patterns appeared in the data to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges that ELLs face. By interviewing both teachers and students of English language, the study indicates participants' belief that teachers who implement more dynamic, student-centered strategies experience higher levels of engagement with their learners and better language acquisition. Based on these findings, the study offers several recommendations to enhance English language instruction in Punjab. Suggested approaches include increasing emphasis placed on vocabulary development, facilitating increased parental involvement, adopting communicative techniques, and further bolstering teacher training. Overall, this study identifies useful implications for policymakers, educators, and researchers that may lead to improvements to language education for primary school ELLs.
Keywords: English Language Learners (ELLs), Language Barriers, Socio-Cultural Economic Factors

1. Introduction

Learning a second language can be quite difficult, particularly where English is not widely spoken (Leung et al., 2014). The English Language Learners (ELLs') learning difficulties in Pakistan's Punjab province, where community-wide ELLs are learning English as a second language among the major portion of the primary school pupils, are multi-layered and influenced by internal and external factors. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the notion of learning difficulties among Punjabi English language learners, focusing on primary schooling in the light of local and global data. Being the most widely spoken language worldwide, English holds an important role in the world today. Pakistani citizens are playing a crucial role in government, trade, education, and international relations. For them, English language skills are key to progress. The students that struggle with getting English language skills are specifically learning disabled, and this is vastly found in primary-level schools, as these foundational language skills are being made (Le Menestrel & Takanishi, 2017). Punjab, the most populous province of Pakistan, hosts the majority of schools that teach in both Urdu and English. In some countries, English serves as a medium of instruction in various subjects and is even introduced in primary school (Asif et al., 2020). Yet, socioeconomic disparity, ineffective teaching methods, and inadequate opportunities inside school and in the society are some of the general challenges that students of English Language face on daily basis (Mehmood & Naseem, 2025). According to Pakistan Education Statistics 2019–2020 (Government of Pakistan, 2020), high-quality English language instructions are not available to around 50% of Punjab's population, especially in the rural areas. In primary

schools, for example, ELLs commonly struggle with poor reading skills, an inadequate vocabulary, and limited exposure to English outside of the classroom. The learning problems faced by students residing in rural areas are many times more than those studying in the urban areas, as a result ruining their academic performance and creating crucial educational gaps (Rehman, 2015). Students from rural backgrounds have limited exposure to English contexts outside the classroom and often speak in local languages such as Punjabi or Urdu at home (Khan & Aslam, 2016). In addition, students' socioeconomic backgrounds also impact their access to extra-language support outside of the classroom (Lu, 2021). Such lack of exposure even outside the four walls of the classroom prevents the students from further developing and using them in real-life situations (Horwitz, 2020). Some of the reasons cited by Himmelfarb (2023) and Grant (2023) include socioeconomic background, language barriers, age-old methodology, teaching practices, and lack of published resources (Collins, 2023), which are all the factors that ELLs struggle with in achieving proficiency in English. Lack of an English-speaking environment outside the class together with traditional methodology is made worse by the socio-cultural and economic background of Punjab (Rehman, 2015).

2. Statement of the Problem

In Punjab, however, while English is taught as a second language, it is often only at the school level, and many students are exposed to it as a foreign language with little support outside of school. Rural–urban and socioeconomic divides, as well as differential parental practices, compound the struggles of ELLs. Despite the large number of initiatives to enhance English teaching in the region, very little work has been done to explore the challenges faced by ELLs learning in the early school years. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the learning challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) in some primary schools along with the factors leading to these challenges and their impacts on students' academic performance. This study, therefore, intends to record participants' perceptions on the learners' difficulties during English language learning. It also highlights major aspects of development of improved teaching strategies, syllabi, and educational policies by studying such obstacles faced by ELLs in Punjab through qualitative methodologies.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the learning difficulties faced by ELLs in primary schools in Punjab.
2. To understand the socio-cultural, economic, and educational factors contributing to these difficulties.
3. To analyze teachers' and students' perspectives on the challenges in learning English.
4. To propose strategies or recommendations for overcoming these learning difficulties.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the various learning difficulties experienced by English language learners in primary schools of Punjab?
2. What are the key socio-cultural, economic, and educational factors contributing to learning difficulties?
3. How do teachers and students perceive learning challenges?
4. What strategies or interventions can be implemented to help address these difficulties?

5. Significance of the Study

This study may be useful for several reasons, particularly in the context of Government of the Punjab's efforts for improving English language learning and its vision of educational progress. First, the results would be helpful for advanced understanding of the unique learning challenges faced by primary-level English Language Learners (ELLs), a crucial yet under-researched area in English language education in Pakistan. Second, the research offers a real picture of what should be done to make English language learning more realistic and applicable

perceived by practitioners and learners. The research additionally explores nature of interactions between students and teachers to conclude the most effective activities and strategies that teachers can adopt in assisting students through negotiating their linguistic challenges. The study also indicates contextual variables that may be crucial to notice as hurdles in English learning. The insightful qualitative analysis may be used as a support for need-based active interventions to reduce the educational gaps of ELLs, especially in rural and underprivileged areas of Punjab. Lastly, current study would provide relevant and meaningful knowledge for understanding variety of aspects in English language learning context in Pakistan.

6. Research Design

The research design refers to the entire plan and strategy of investigation used to attain objectives of the study (Arbale & Mutisya, 2024). Current study employed a qualitative research design to examine learning problems that English Language Learners (ELLs) face during their primary school level in Punjab. A qualitative approach was adopted because it was researchers' belief that the issues surrounding language learning are less about the individuals themselves and more about impacting society, culture, and environment. Therefore, a comprehensive and deeper understanding of the subject was the focus of the study. Qualitative research, thus, was considered most appropriate in understanding participant's life experiences and the growth of language acquisition processes.

7. Sampling and Participants

Sampling is the procedure of choosing a portion of respondents from a larger population (Aldaihani et al., 2023). The study employed purposive sampling, taking into account that the sample consisted of different students and instructors. Since this was qualitative research, this non-random sampling type is appropriate because the researcher selects those participants who can provide varied responses that may be helpful to reach vigorous conclusions based on their experience and knowledge (Khalefa & Selian, 2021). There were two types of participants in this study. First, the English language teachers in primary schools were selected based on the criterion that they had some experience in teaching English language learners. Secondly, the English Language Learners (ELLs) in the 4th and 5th grades of primary schools where students experience initial transition from basic tones of spoken English to narratives of written English. Perceptions of both categories of participants i.e. teachers and students, were considered important as they were essential part of English language learning process.

8. Sample Size

Table 2

Participant	Sample Size	Description
Students	10 Students	English Language Learners (ELLs) from primary school grades 4-5, selected to capture the critical language development process.
Teachers	10 Teachers	Primary school English language teachers with a minimum of two years of experience teaching ELLs in various primary schools of Punjab.

9. Research Instruments

This study used semi-structured interviews as research tool which was carefully designed to obtain information that answered the objectives of the research better and provide rich data to extract meaningful conclusions through a deeper understanding of the learning challenges faced by primary school English language learners (ELLs).

9.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by English language learners in the classroom. A semi-structured format, coupled with follow-up questions, made it possible to explore participants' perceptions in greater depth.

Interview Questions for Teachers
1. Explain the most significant learning difficulties faced by English language learners in your classroom?
2. How do you address challenges related to vocabulary, reading, and pronunciation in your teaching?
3. What teaching methods do you primarily use, and how effective do you find them for language learners?
4. How do you engage students' parents in supporting their children's language development?

Interview Questions for Students
1. What do you find most difficult about learning English?
2. Do you feel comfortable speaking English in class? Could you explain why you don't feel comfortable speaking English in class?
3. What types of teaching activities help you learn English better?
4. How do you feel about your English lessons?

10. Thematic Analysis

The analysis used to draw conclusion in this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is considered to be one of the most effective ways of analysis in qualitative studies. All the steps of thematic analysis such as familiarization of data, coding, creating categories, generating themes and reviewing of themes were carefully completed to reach consequent themes.

Thematic analysis of data obtained through interviews of participants on learning challenges of English language learners (ELLs) in Punjab primary schools yielded four themes. The detail of the obtained themes is described further below.

Table. 2

	Theme	Subthemes
1	Learning Difficulties in English Language	• Limited vocabulary acquisition • Difficulty with grammar and sentence structure • Anxiety or lack of confidence in using English
2	Challenges in Language Components	• Struggles with word recognition and meaning • Pronunciation and phonemic awareness issues • Reading fluency and comprehension difficulties
3	Teaching and Learning Strategies	• Use of interactive and communicative methods • Incorporation of multimedia or visual aids
4	Parental Involvement in Language Learning	• Encouragement and use of English at home

- Access to additional English learning resources

Theme 1: Learning Difficulties in English

The following flow chart indicates theme 1 and its relevant sub-themes:
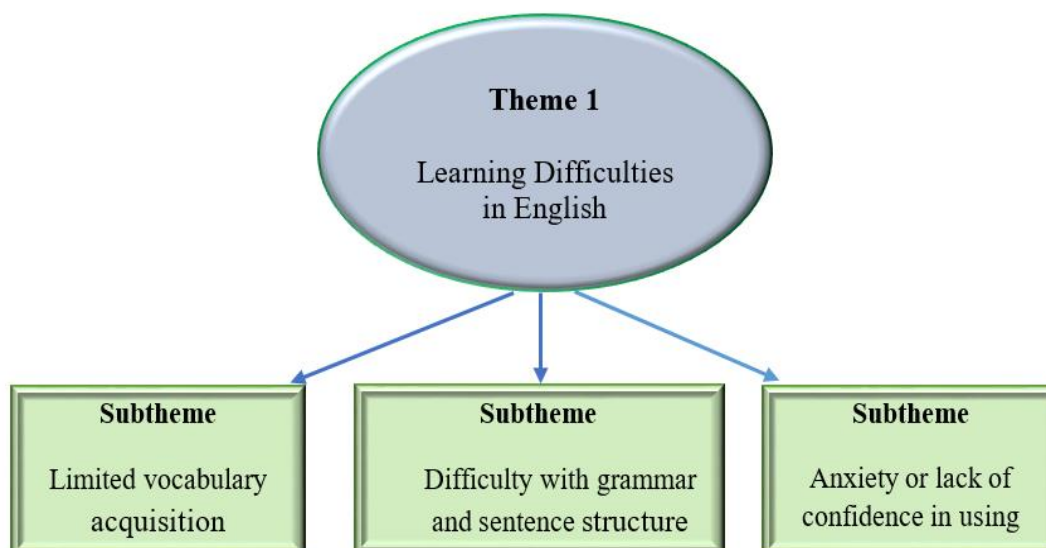

Fig. 1: Theme 1 and sub-themes

The responses gathered from ten English language teachers highlighted three recurring subthemes under the broader category of learning difficulties in English: as shown above the sub-themes included (1) Limited Vocabulary Acquisition, (2) Difficulty with Grammar and Sentence Structure, and (3) Anxiety or Lack of Confidence in Using English. Almost all participants reiterated these sub-themes except a couple of them. Some quotes from participants' (teachers) are added below;

Respondent 2 quoted,

"Vocabulary is one of the weakest areas. Students tend to memorize words for tests, but they rarely apply them correctly in meaningful communication".

Respondent 5 stated,

"Grammar errors are common in both writing and speaking. Most students struggle with subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and sentence formation".

Respondent 8 opined,

"Many students feel embarrassed when speaking English. This fear holds them back, especially during group activities or presentations".

Theme 1 demonstrates that learning difficulties in English are not solely linguistic but are compounded by emotional and psychological factors. The interconnection between limited vocabulary, grammatical challenges, and affective barriers such as anxiety and low confidence creates a complex learning environment where one challenge often intensifies another. This holistic understanding highlights the necessity for instructional and support strategies that address both the cognitive and emotional needs of learners to foster meaningful language acquisition.

Theme 2: Linguistic challenges

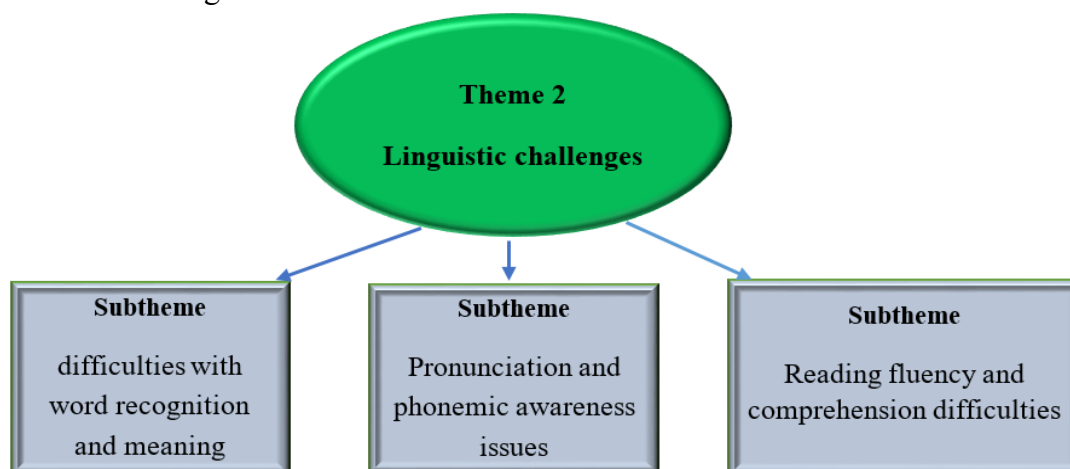The following flow chart indicates theme 2 and its relevant sub-themes:

Fig. 2: Theme 2 and sub-themes

This second theme emerging from data highlighted specific linguistic difficulties students face in English language learning, as reported by teacher participants. The data revealed three interconnected subthemes: (1) difficulties with word recognition and meaning, (2) pronunciation and phonemic awareness issues, and (3) reading fluency and comprehension difficulties.

The interview data again showed a pattern that lead to the emergence of theme 2. Some of the quotes are added below for clarity of the reader.

Respondent 7 stated,

> *"I've seen many students skip unfamiliar words while reading. They rarely use context to guess meanings which affects their understanding and leads to shallow comprehension."*

Respondent 9 explained,

> *"Even when students can read a word, they often say it incorrectly. They don't have strong listening models at home, so errors become fossilize."*

Respondent 10 commented,

> *"My learners can decode text but lack comprehension. They can read aloud but fail to explain what they've read, especially when texts contain complex ideas or abstract language."*

The results uncovered how difficulties in word recognition, phonics, and reading comprehension are intrinsically connected and together inhibit language growth. Poor word recognition means less vocabulary acquisition but also worsened articulation and reading fluency. Thus, pronunciation issues decrease both listening understanding and talking confidence, even as reading issues affect impression comprehension and engagement. Similarly, other teachers and students emphasized the co-existence and compounding nature of these challenges, calling for the integration of instruction. This emphasis on contextualized vocabulary teaching and systematic pronunciation training to develop an English-speaking experience that is engaging, confident, and holistic can be clearly seen in the alignment between the voice of the teachers and the voice of the students.

Theme 3: Effective Teaching and Learning Strategies

This theme explores the pedagogical strategies employed by English language teachers to support student learning and improve language outcomes. Analysis of teacher responses

revealed three core subthemes: (1) Use of Interactive and Communicative Methods, (2) Incorporation of Multimedia or Visual Aids.
Respondent 1 stated,

> *"I often use pair work and group discussions to promote speaking and listening. These interactive tasks help students feel more relaxed and build confidence through real-life communication scenarios."*

Respondent 4 added,

> *"Multimedia tools like animated stories and educational YouTube videos make learning fun. They also improve listening skills and expose students to native pronunciation."*

Theme 3: Effective Teaching and Learning in English language teaching

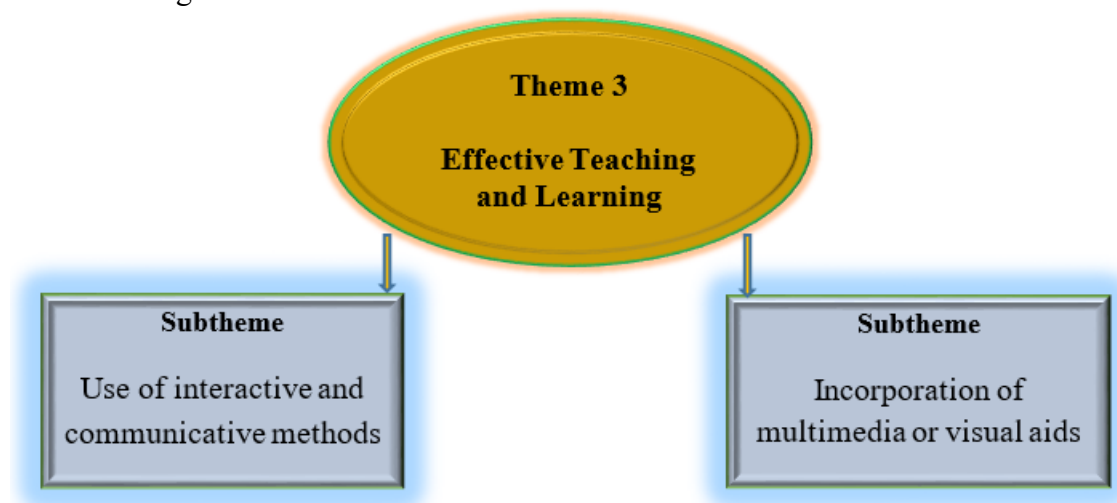The following flow chart indicates theme 3 and its relevant sub-themes:

Fig. 3: Theme 3 and sub-themes

Findings on Theme 3

The results show a higher conformity between the teachers and students with regard to effective teaching and learning strategy. Communicative and interactive approaches, as well as the use of multimedia resources have been known to be important for initiating a learner-centered environment focused on active participation, minimizing anxiety, and fostering the development of different skills integral to language learning. They promote linguistic proficiency, as well as confidence and motivation among learners, demonstrating the importance of participatory, multimodal learning in English classrooms.

Theme 4: Parental Involvement in Language Learning

This theme examines how parents support their children's English language learning outside the classroom. Teachers identified two key areas of involvement: (1) parental support through homework assistance; and (2) access to additional English learning resources.
Respondent 2 stated,

> *"Some parents encourage their children to speak or read English at home, even just basic sentences. The practice helps build fluency and reinforces classroom learning."*

Respondent 8 explained,

"I've seen students make progress when parents subscribe to English-learning channels or apps. It increases their listening and reading time beyond school hours."
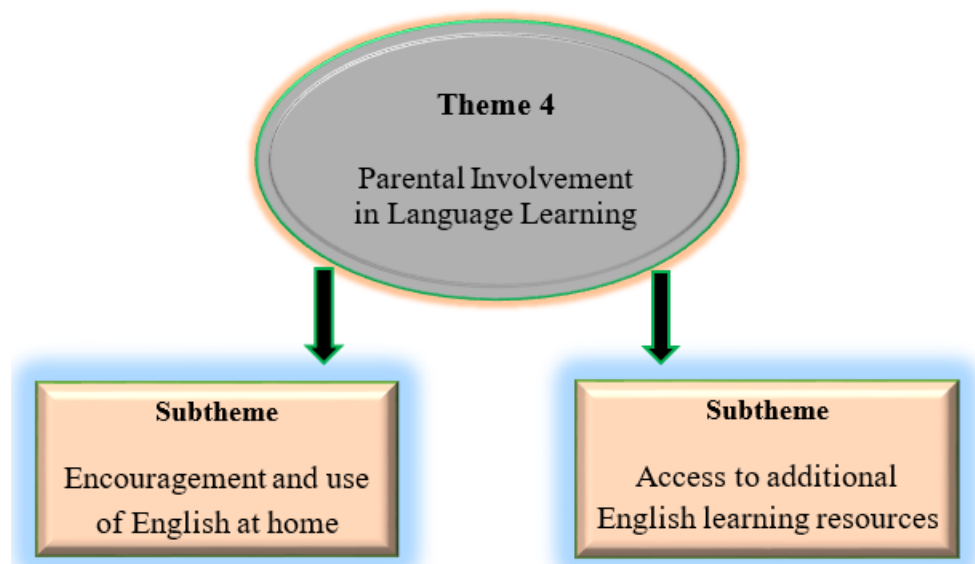

Fig. 4: Theme 4 and its subthemes

Findings on Theme 4

Families play an important role in ensuring that students learn English. Parents and more knowledgeable others play a crucial role by encouraging learners to use English at home and providing supportive learning materials. Although the level of parental support is also determined by their financial and language skills of the parents, all kinds of engagement are supportive to have a positive impact on the motivation and confidence of the learners. The alignment between teacher and student perceptions in this case emphasizes the importance of support at home as part of successful English language learning. However, there is a potential to bolster this key aspect of language development even more through ways to address socioeconomic inequities and by investing more in parental capability.

11. Conclusion

Collectively, the findings suggest that a combination of cognitive, emotional, pedagogical, and socio-environmental factors shapes English language learning. Challenges in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and reading comprehension are compounded by emotional barriers such as anxiety and low confidence. However, these difficulties can be mitigated through student-centered teaching strategies, multi-sensory learning tools, and consistent support at home. Effective language learning environments require collaboration among teachers, students, and families, with attention to individual needs, diverse learning styles, and equitable access to resources. Addressing these elements will holistically support students better in becoming confident and competent English users.

12. Discussion

One of the most significant of challenges of ELL, is vocabulary acquisition, which continues to be a considerable roadblock. The heavy reliance on rote memorization and translation suggests a methodological shortcoming, one that does not help in developing a depth-based, contextual understanding of newly learnt vocabulary. These limitations impact comprehension and expression, further emphasizing the importance of teaching vocabulary in authentic, meaningful contexts. This correlates with the Normurodovna (2025) research, which

states that we can only be able to retain and utilize vocabulary assessed if we have encountered these in different contexts and varied situations on multiple occasions. Many continue to suffer from errors in grammar and style, which appear to stem from first-language interference and incomplete anatomical structure in their grammar. In a broader context, and as Ellis and Laporte (2014) reported, which also fed our rationale for our studies, the presence of transfer errors from learners' native languages is a well-documented phenomenon in second language acquisition, and explicit contextualized grammar instruction offers a means of scaffolding the developmental path by addressing such challenges. Issues such as reading fluency, pronunciation, and even word recognition complicate language development.

Ashford (2024) has demonstrated that integrating phonics with vocabulary instruction enhances both decoding and comprehension skills. Importantly, both teachers and students advocated for interactive, communicative, and multimodal teaching strategies. These learner-centered methods increase engagement, reduce anxiety, and cater to diverse learning preferences. This study is consistent with the findings of Triwibowo (2023), who highlights communicative language teaching as effective in promoting practical language use and student motivation. Moreover, Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning supports the use of visual and auditory materials to enhance comprehension and retention. Parental involvement emerged as a crucial but unevenly distributed resource. Encouragement and supplementary learning support at home contribute positively to language outcomes, but disparities in parental language proficiency and economic means highlight equity issues. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Harris and Robinson (2016) on the framework of parental involvement, which links family engagement with improved academic achievement but also acknowledges the challenges faced by families with limited resources.

13. Recommendations

The study's findings suggest several ways to enhance English language learning for English Language Learners (ELLs) at primary school level.

1. For Instructors

Professional Development

Language pedagogy is a crucial and complex process that needs a comprehensive preparation on teachers' part. Teachers of ELL should have access to ongoing professional development to improve their understanding of effective strategies for teaching English language learners. This may include helping them with pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as tips on how to improve their writing or reading comprehension. The researchers of this study have an agreement on that some steps must be taken by the authorities to include interactive material and experts from native speaking populace to share a native feel among ELLs.

Interactive and Communicative Approaches

Teachers must be equipped with various interactive and communication-focused methods for students to have opportunities of engagement with the language in context as it is naturally heard. Using methods such as role-plays, group discussions, and project-based learning helps in honing students' language skills in a more engaging and realistic setting.

2. For Schools

Language Support Programs

Schools need to develop language support services that focus not just on developing language skills for ELLs but on ensuring they are able to learn vocabulary and develop reading and writing habits in their native and English language. Such programs, focusing only on addressing specific language barriers, may include one-on-one lessons or small-group training. Again, the services of native and native-like instructors may be utilized for real feel of pronunciation and semantic aspects of English language.

Language-rich Environment

Schools generally have to work to create a context in which the English language is frequently employed for both formal and informal communications. Such as giving students opportunities to use English outside the classroom by offering extracurricular activities, encouraging students to use English signs and providing them with access to written and spoken texts.

3. For Policymakers

Curriculum Reform

Policymakers should consider modifying the curriculum to be appropriate and goal oriented for teachers and students of English language. It means embedding language development across all topics and ensuring that teachers have access to the tools and training to help ELLs appropriately.

More Financing for Language Education

Especially in rural areas, it is the government that should subsidies the elementary school English language education. That may include the provision of audio-visuals, English-language books, or even teachers' training courses.

4. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could explore what the interactions between teachers and students should look like in ELL classrooms, including the type of support teachers provide for language learning across lessons and how different interaction patterns may facilitate language development.

Longitudinal Studies

Over several years, longitudinal studies may be conducted to observe how ELLs' English language proficiency develops and how the challenges of acquiring a new language are resolved.

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