Causes of Poor Performance in English at Secondary School Level in Pakistan

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored causes of poor performance of students in English language at secondary schoollevel. The sample of the study consisted of 31 teachers of English,teaching in public sector schools in Abbottabad, Pakistan.Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that lack of adequate administration, lack of facilities, inadequate examination system, large class size, under qualified teachers, inadequate language teaching methods, and lack of cooperation on the part of parents were major causes of poor performance ofstudents in English language at secondary level. The study has important implications for teachers, students, policy makers and education researchers.

Key words: poor performance, causes, secondary school, poor administration

Introduction and Background

English is an international language. Due to its significance on an international level mainly as a source of knowledge and communication, English has been taught as one of the compulsory school subjects in numerous countries around the world. Rehman (2012) identifies English language as an important tool of national and international communication and commerce in the Pakistani context.

Like elsewhere around the world, English has been one of the compulsory school subjects in Pakistan. This subject is also regarded as one of the most difficult subjects. ELT research in Pakistan reveal many students who complete high school and enroll in various private and public sector higher education institutions remain deficient in using English language in their social, personal, academic, and professional life (Al-Issa, 2009). However, despite being an important and compulsory subject, English has

also been one of the subjects which is generally considered as a difficult subject by students and teachers in the ESL context. This often leads to poor performance of students in the subject at various levels of education. In the Pakistani context many students fail in the subject of English at the secondary school level. Keeping in view this background, the purpose of current qualitative study was to look into the reasons behind pupils' poor performance in English at secondary school level in Abbottabad, Hazara.

A variety of factors have been identified thatlead to poor result of students in English language as a school subject. These factors include student centered problems including their weakeducational base, interference of their mother tongue or local language, and their parental and socio-economic background. The factors also include teacher centered factors including lack of proper professional training as language teachers, unqualified or under qualified teacher recruitment and lack of professionalism, lack of skills in proper language teaching and commitment on the part of teachers. Then there are issues in the evaluation system which places a premium on rote learning rather than actual learning. On a broader level there are issues in the course work and curricula which seem to have been prepared inadequately and often do not reflect the importance of English language in a functional sense. The following sections elaborate on these factors:

Teachers' Centered Problems

Teachers' centered problems include use of traditional teaching methods by teachers in the classroom, lack of professionalism, and lack of proper training and teaching facilities in schools.

Traditional methods of teaching

One of the main issues that stand in the way of proper teaching and learning of English language at the secondary school level has the use of traditional, old style and teacher centered teaching methods by English language teachers in schools. Ahmad et al, (2013), pointed out that English language teachers generally avoid the use of modern, activity based teaching methods. They also argue that teachers are stuck with old fashioned, teacher centered methods which are often not very effective in terms students'

active involvement in the educational process, leading to their low performance. Similarly Ali, (2011) suggest that the most of teachers make use of the traditional Grammar Translation Method and their lack of expertise and inclination to make effective use of Communicative Teaching Method results in an ineffective teaching learning environment, ultimately resulting in poor students' performance in the subject. The other teacher centered issue. The other teacher centered issue Ahmad et al, (2012) highlight is the selective course teaching by teachers of English language in schools. They argue that English language teachers often teach to test. Their focus is on selected parts of the syllabus that only makes students to rote learn and prepare for passing in examinations rather than deep learning and understanding of the English language. Overall lack of training in modern teaching methods of language and traditional attitude towards teaching have been identified as main hurdles in the way of effective English language teaching.

Lack of Professionalism

Professionalism is an important characteristic of successful teachers. The professional skills of theteachershelp in the creation of a productive classroom atmosphere, that is based on sound organization and planning of the lesson (Rehmani, 2003). According to Rehmani, professional skill frequently translates into high-quality teaching with the aim of influencing students' learning. Teacher professionalism is often highlighted in qualities such as prompt reaction, questioning, successfully resolving students' concerns, and providing different types of environments for different lessons, ensuring that students comprehend and handle the amounts of information provided to them. Rehmani (2003), however, argues that such professionalism is not widespread among language teachers in schools, which often leads to improper English teaching and hence results in poor performance of students in the subject.

Lack of Teachers' Commitment and Motivation

It is often claimed that one of the reasons for students' poor performance is teachers' lack of commitment (Khan, 2013). Teachers are in many cases poorly motivated to do their job of teaching because their basic requirements are not met. Ahmad et al,

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(2013) suggests that when teachers are poorly motivated their job performance is compromised. According to Rehmani (2003), factors that lead to lack of motivation and commitment on the part of teachers includepoor working conditions, lack of facilities, lack of good models of teaching, lack of supervision and low socio-economic backgrounds of teachers and students. These factors lead to an overall lack of motivation on the part of teachers, resulting in poor presentation of students in the English subject.

Improper Training

Proper training of teachers for their jobs is an important aspect of quality teaching. It has been argued that improving the quality of education requires teacher training. Teachers cannot be able to play any of their roles unless they are well trained. Training and practice can help to improve teaching. Therefore, having skilled teachers in schools is important for enhancing student achievement. Quality teachers who are well-trained and motivated are required for learners to perform successfully (Rehmani, 2003). Research also suggests that teachers are the driving force in schools. Mansour (2008) suggests that good teachers in general and language teachers in particular are those who are well-informed in their subjects and know how to explain the subject matters to learners and vary ways in which they teach to suit learners in their classes. They also noted that good teachers engage and motivate students by ensuring that they understand the material and aiding students with learning difficulties.

Lack of Facilities

Teaching learning becomes influential if the syllabus is properly planned and taught with the help of proper audio visual aids. Qasim and Arif (2014) documented that lack offundamental teaching aids and facilities often result in low quality of teaching. Lack of adequate facilities has been a consistent issue identified in research studies that has been associated with inadequate language teaching in classrooms. Bista (2011) suggests that we can overcome the rising failure of students in the subject of English by properly facilitating the teaching process through the use of teaching aids. In many cases poorly equipped learning environments result in improper teaching and poor student achievement in language classrooms.

Student Centered Factors

A variety of students' centered factors have been identified that contribute to the phenomenon of unsuccessful or low quality English language teaching in the ESL context. Some of the important students' centered issues include low socio-economic and family background of students, lack of parental involvement and mother tong interference beside other factors.

According to Mansoor, (2005) social background of learners is important in determining the level of learners'educational achievement. Mansoor (2005) suggests that generally students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds have lesser home assistance in their studies that often leads to their lower performance in the English language subject. Kraft (2003) concurs with Mansoor's view and includes that many students in backward areas come from poor families. This makes it hard to perform well in learning English languagemainly due to lack of focus and interest in the class. According to Yankson (2006), many students in Sub-Saharan Africa are forced to work as laborers to pay their schooling fees. As a result learners come to schools exhausted and often find it difficult to focus on their studies. Absenteeism from school is an important consequence of this. According to Kraft (2003), socioeconomic inequalities have an impact on children's English learning. Such a situation badly affects students' interest in their studies in the school.

Lack of Parental Interest

Successful school education including language education is often an outcome of a collaboration teachers and parents. According to Rehman (2012 lack of parental interest in teaching learning process and theirlack of awareness regarding the education of their children are one of the major causes of students` failure. Moreover, Siddiqui (2002) says that usually parents of those students who study in public sector schools do not have enough awareness about their children`s activities. Lack of parental involvement is, therefore, often associated with a significant role in students' failure in subjects including English. Furthermore, Mansoor (2005) suggested that usually parents of those students who study in government schools often belong to poor socio-economic

background. Such parents are often either illiterate or have low educational backgrounds. This makes it almost impossible for them to participate in the education of their children. This results in a gap between home and school and impacts students' performance.

Mother Tongue

Another factor that hampers the process of acquisition of the English language is the mother tongue interference. According to Yankson (2006), while learning a second language, the learner may consciously or unintentionally transmit traits from his L1 system into the L2 system. As a result, certain L2 errors may be connected to detrimental L1 effect. Rehmani (2003) writes that in Pakistan much emphasis is laid on English language learning turning into a second language. Despite the importance of English, the mother tongue remains dominant in terms of its influence on the thinking of students. Ahmad (2013) concludes that mother tongue interference has substantial impact on the quality of the English learning process for students.

Evaluation/Examination Centered Factors

Memory Based

Rehmani, (2003) argues that examination system in the Pakistani context puts more emphasison memorization rather than real language learning based on cognitive understanding.Ahmad (2013) also suggest that teachers often teach to test and force students to memorize material rather than to enhance their conceptual understanding and independent learning as far as English language learning is concerned.

Ahmad et al, (2013) suggest that students and English teachers have become examination minded and do not bother about the real teaching learning of English language. Exam fear and the drive to perform well in the examinations often discourage teachers and students to engage in real learning. Khan (2013) points outthat in Pakistan evaluation usually means pencil and paper test at the end of each academic year with an objective to pass or fail students.

Overload of Content in the Syllabus

Overload of the content in the syllabus has also been associated with low academic achievement of students in English language. According to Kraft (2003), the

syllabus demonstrates that the English language content to be taught in each school level is overburdened. Many English teachers are unable to complete both the English syllabus and the reading text for each year. Research suggests that heavy load of contents inside a subject or across subject often leads to superficial coverage of the syllabus (Kraft, 2003). This is often associated with running through the syllabus rather than with a focus on actual learning or teaching of the subject material. This, thus leads of rote memorization and ultimately students fail in an authentic examination environment.

Overall, it could be concluded that a variety of factors have been attributed in previous studies to students' poor performance in the English subject. These factors include teacher centered problems, student centered problems, and environment centered problems, problems in evaluation, assessment and problems in terms of lack of parental cooperation. Keeping in view this background, the current study was aimed to explore the issue from the perspectives of the primary stake holders i.e. teachers and students of English language at the secondary school level, in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Research methodology

Qualitative research design was used for this study. Qualitative research is generally flexible and evolves during the research process. It is used to have insights into underlying reasons, perspectives and inspirations. Qualitative research is generally inductive in nature andour insights evolve as data is being collected and analyzed during the course of the study (Berg, 2007).

The sources of data were secondary school teachers. The sample of this study consisted of 31 secondary school English teachers (one from each school). The sample was chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling technique is one of the most commonly adopted techniques in qualitative interview studies (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Purposive sampling is a technique for selecting participants who are thought to be the most suitable for data collection based on the qualitative study's objectives. In line with ethical considerations respondents were recruited through informed consent and were kept anonymous in the research reports.

Semi structured interviews were used for data collection. These interviews were done in order to obtain detailed responses from the respondents addressing the issue, which was a requirement of this study. Semi-structured interview is an important tool for social science data collection, because it is flexible and allows researchers to acquire insights into people's attitudes, values, and beliefs (Cohen, Manion & Morison, 2007).

Permission was obtained from District Education Officer Abbottabad for formal data collection process. Following the receipt of a permission letter, sample schools were visited to determine the suitable days and times for data collecting. The interviews were personally conducted by the first author with the sample students and teachers. After gaining the participants' consent, the interviews were conducted. Confidentiality and privacy were ensured to participants of the study and the data collection process followed ethical considerations suggested for qualitative studies. Pseudonyms were used instead of the participants' real names in order to keep them anonymous in the research report.

General qualitative, interview data analysis techniques were used for analyzing the data obtained (Creswell, 2007, Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcribing the interviews, the next stage was reading and re-reading the data to make sense of the data. This was followed by the identification of themes, which included the development of a thematic chart and the compilation of relevant extracts from coded data into themes. These thematic charts facilitated the understanding of the main themes and sub-themes. Each thematic category categorized the coded data by the time all thematic charts were developed. Themes and sub-themes were developed from significant categories of data. The final phase was to refine themes and create explanations; at this point, all of the coded passages were carefully reviewed and re-read in order to refine the themes. Some sub-themes were found to overlap with others, and these themes were grouped together with other themes or sub-themes.

Peer review and pilot testing were used to determine the interview's reliability and validity. The interviews were peer-reviewed by the research supervisor and fellow students in accordance with the study objectives and questions. Minor changes to the

interview items were made on the basis of the peer review process. Respondent validation was also used to enhance the authenticity of the data obtained through interviews.

Findings

The findings of the study have been arranged into four main categories: school related causes of poor performance in English, teacher related causes of poor performance in English, students' related causes and parents' related causes. These categories enfold a number of themes that are elaborated with related quotes from the data gathered through interviews.

School Related Causes

School related causes of students' poor English performance included lack of adequate school administration, lack of physical infrastructure or equipment such libraries, language labs and other learner support materialsand large class size. Inadequate school administration was identified as one of the main causes for secondary school students' poor achievement in English language. The following are some of the representative quotes from interviews that highlight these causes further:

Lack of Adequate School Administration

Anwar, a teacher said:

I think that the main cause of the students' poor output at secondary level in English is poor school administration. The head of this school does not cooperate with the teachers in the process of teaching and learning.

Niaz, another teacher argued:

I think lack of leadership skills of the school head is also an important cause of students' poor performance in English. Some heads are incompetent of making the school atmosphere suitable teachers and their pupils in terms of developing an adequate teaching learning environment. They do not administerand guide teachers on daily bases. Students and teachers are not forced to speak English or maintain good discipline during English language classes in order to foster the establishment of an English language environment.

Overcrowded Classrooms

Overcrowded classroom was another factor identified as causing lack of proper English language teaching in the class. Respondents argued that large classes made it hard for English language teachers to teach adequately and productively. In such large classes teachers just focus on getting through the course and in maintaining discipline in the class. Productive language teaching therefore becomes secondary. The quotes regarding this theme as follow:

Sajid, a teacher said:

Well, I want to share with you that I am unable to teach English language properly due to overcrowded classes. Almost each class at secondary level has more than 50 students. So I think this situation lead to learners' unsatisfactory position in English language.

Ahmed Nawaz, another teacher argued:

I have often observed that due to overcrowded class studentscannot participate in the classroom activities including active language use. As a result they poorly perform in the examination.

Lack of Facilities

In school centered problems, lack of facilities also came out as an important factor causing improper English language instruction.

Saghir, for instance, argued:

Well, in my viewinadequate facilities in the school are one of the major causes of poorpresentation of students in English at secondary level.Many topics in the English textbooks are based on different skills. But unfortunately no facility of language lab is available in the school to enhance different language skills of the students.

Similarly, Assad said:

I think there is a lack of learning facilities government schools. There is no trend of language labsas they are in other leading schools in private sectors. I think this situation leads to students' poor performance in English.

Teachers Related Causes

Findings revealed that most of the teachers did not gettraining regarding the use ofcurrent English curriculum. Teachers presented the content using traditional teaching methodologies, which contributed to pupils' poor performance in English at the secondary level. Findings of the study revealed that there was alack of qualified and capableeducators in secondary schools especially in English subject that was considered a major cause of poor performance of students in English language. The following are few quotations from respondents' interviews regarding this theme.

Lack of Training on the Part of Teachers

Amjid, a teacher argued:

In my point of view, mostly teachers of the government sector are not trained enough in English language. They cannot be able to improve students' language skills because they do not know the art of teaching. So I think lack of teachers' training in English language is a main cause of students' unsatisfactory performance.

Ahmed said:

In my point of view English teachers are not trained adequately for useful English teaching in public schools. The recruitment process fail to recruit teachers who have adequate knowledge and skills as competent teachers. This leads to unsuccessful teaching of English language.

Similarly, Hassan, another teacher said:

Yes, I think that it is difficult for teachers to handle the English language class successfully without having any training in this particular subject. Untrained and incapable teachers contribute to unsatisfactory performance of students in English language.

Traditional Methods Used by Teachers

Prevalence of traditional teaching methods that are not based on research and are not in line with the requirements of modern teaching learning philosophies, were associated with inadequate teaching of the English language in schools.

Nasir, a respondent commented:

I think, at all levels, the English language is taught in an unnatural manner in public schools, may be with a few exceptions. Teachers in public schools hardly exercise a direct method for language teaching which is generally considered more useful in modern language classrooms.

Saghir, another respondent argued:

In my opinion English language teachers are not academically competent to effectively teach the language. They do noted a good job of teaching English because they aren't experts in the English subject. They are simply graduates in various fields such as history, social studies, and Urdu, among others.

Jamil said:

I think teachers and their methods of teaching play an important role in the process of learning. But unfortunately teachers use traditional method of teaching which cause to performance of students.

Students Related Causes

The findings of the study indicated that lack of vocabulary and lack of knowledge of proper pronunciation, poor primary school background andthe use of the mother tongue during the teaching process often stood in the way of effective English language learning.

Lack of Vocabulary

Nawaz, a teacher said:

In my view themajor cause of poor performance in English is mispronunciation of the words on the part of teachers that leads to incorrect pronunciation learning of students. Such issues often lead to mistakes in spellings as well that impact students' performance in written evaluations.

Iqbal, another teacher commented:

Well, in my view lack of vocabulary is a main cause of students 'poor performance English language at secondary level. Due to lack of a reading culture, students and even teachers remain deficient in building adequate vocabulary which is quite an essential component of mastering the use of English language.

Several other respondents also identified lack of proper vocabulary an important issue impacting their performance in English language.

Poor Primary School Background

Ahmed, a teacher said:

In my opinion, schooling at elementary school level is not good in our public schools. Basic ideas of the students about English grammar, structure and vocabulary are not clear. So I think due to poor elementary background students find it difficult toperform well at secondary level.

Similarly, Ibrar commented:

At primary school level, studentsare not exposed to good quality English learning environment. And I think unsatisfactory background of English at elementary school level is a main cause of students' deprived performance in English.

The use of Mother Tongue

Frequent use of the mother tongue in the school and home environment was considered as a factor that leads to lesser exposure of students to an English learning environment, where English is learnt in a more natural way. Most respondents argued that students and even teachers think and interact in the mother tongue, and this interferes with their English language learning.

Ahmed Nawaz, a teacher commented:

Well, in my point of view students frequently exercise mother tongue everywhere for communication and English is only used within the four walls of the classroom and it ends there. Even inside the classroom, English is not taught in an active, natural way. Students' English language proficiency in secondary school suffers as a result of this condition.

Niaz Ahmed argued:

I think that conversation of students in public sector schools from elementary to secondary levelmostly happens mostly in their mother tongue. Very little English is used in daily conversations in schools. So I think this situation makes students unsuccessfulin performing well in English.

Jamil, commented:

In my opinion the use of mother tongue especially in the English language classroom is one of the main causes that lead to students' poor English language performance.

Parents Related Causes

The study found that most students in public schools come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents of such students generally lack the ability to assist their children in their English language learning. There is thus no support from home. This often leadsto poor performance students in English language and other course subjects as well. The following quotations from the respondents' interviews elaborate this theme:

Nasir, a teacher commented:

Most of the students in government schools belong to poor families. Their living conditions are not suitable to learning English. They face several problems in their homes. It is challenging for students to perform effectively in English and other disciplines in these circumstances.

Zaheer, another teacher said that household issues including family size, lack of privacy and lack of proper space for study often lead to poor English language performance of students.

Assad commented:

I think it is painful that most parents neglect their responsibilities to their children and leave everything to teachers. The success of every child rests first on the shoulders of his parents, then the teachers. Parents are the ones with the core responsibility of helping each child. I also noted that most parents are too busy and have little or no time to spend with their children.

Ahmed, another teacher argued:

In my opinionlack of education of parents can result in low performance of students in English. Illiterate parents are often unable to help their children in their learning process.

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Several other respondents argued on those lines that lack of adequate parenting mainly because of the parents being illiterate or insufficiently educated often leads to their inability to assist their children in their studies in general and in the challenging subject of English in particular.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that a variety of issues have been identified as possible causes for poor English performance of students in at secondary school level. An important cause identified in this study was lack of adequate leadership input on the part of school heads. This is similar to findings by Ballard (2007) lack of proper administrative and instructional leadership input often contributes in poor quality education including language education in schools. The study also revealed that lack of proper educational facilities like school buildings, adequate instructional spaces, language labs, libraries, audio visual aids and basic amenities in school context results in poor English language teaching and learning. Khan (2012) states that sufficient and quality school facilities are basic ingredients for quality education that results in the achievement of desired educational goals. Large class size was also one of the major causes that contributed poor output of the students in English language at secondary level. This is similar with findings of Atta, Jamil, Ayaz, and Shah (2011) who concluded that maintaining a manageable students' number in the class is an important consideration in productive language teaching.

The current study also indicated that lack of training and professionalism on the part of teachers also contributed to students' low performance in English language. This is similar to findings by Adedokum (2012) who concluded that lack of proper trained teachers had significant impact on the performance of students in English language. Besides, this study also indicated that lack of parental interest was a cause that negatively affected the performance of students in English. Manrique, (2013) also argues that lack of parental participation is a significant factor in impacting students' performance in language learning and general academic achievement. Use of mother tongue and inadequate primary schooling was also among the main reasons for poor English

language performance in secondary school. The current study also found that students' English performance is frequently affected by a lack of vocabulary and grammar. Sato (2003) found that students find it difficult to speak English fluently because they are afraid of making mistakes and have a limited vocabulary. Ballard (2007) also found that students avoid participating in English conversations owing to a lack of English vocabulary, linguistic difficulties, and a fear of making mistakes, resulting in their inability to speak effectively in English. It is widely believed that the family background and the role of uneducated parents' have a significant impact on students' academic performance including their performance in language learning.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is case for the provision of conducive environment in schools for quality English teaching. There is also case for the use of more productive, modern methods of teaching English in schools in order to make the teaching learning process more interactive and student centered. The use of traditional teaching methods where students just and listen to teachers lectures without active involvement came out as an important factor causing low student performance in the English subject.Besides, overcrowded classes, frequent use of mother tongue in the classroom and in schools in general, lack of English vocabulary and attitude of students towards Englishwere also some of the major causes that led to poor performance of students in English. In public schools, the majority of students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The students' home environment is not conducive to studying English.The majority of parents appear to be unaware of the importance of being involved in their children's education. Such parents rarely visit schools of their children which often results in low morale among students leading to their poor academic performance.

Recommendations

The government might hold in-service training and seminars for English teachers to keep them up to date on new techniques and methodologies for secondary school teaching. To facilitate the teaching and learning process at the secondary school

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level in there may be provision for necessary teaching and learning materials. School heads might find ways to encourage parents to participate actively in their children's secondary school education. Parents may be assisted to develop a home environment that encourages English language development at home. This might be done by making a small home bookstore and setting study time for the children. The secondary school examination system may be improved. At secondary school levelefforts need to be made to reduce class size to make them more manageable for English language teachers. Besides, improvement of textbooks and evaluation system to turn them into sources that encourage real cognitive development may also be helpful in improving English language learning on the part of students.

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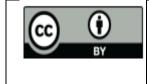
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