

## IS IT THE WAY TO TEACH LANGUAGE THE WAY WE TEACH LANGUAGE? ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN RURAL PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*With the growing importance and need of English language in the global context, efforts are being made in the developing context to improve the quality of teaching English with the assumption that teaching of English facilitates the acquisition of English Language. What is Pakistani teachers approach to the teaching of English language and does the way they teach English facilitate the language acquisition? The current study explores this question at secondary level in the context of Chitral, a remote district of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province Pakistan. The researcher visited the randomly selected secondary schools and consulted English teachers interviewing them and observing the teaching and learning processes. The study reveals that in the context of Chitral, teaching of English is not different from teaching of other subjects such as social studies, history etc. Translation method is the dominant way to teach English and learners hardly get any opportunity to practice language skills in the classrooms. The reasons behind this approach to the teaching of English are; lack of purposefully trained teachers, non-availability of in-service courses for secondary level English teachers, memory driven exam system, overcrowded classrooms, teachers' work load, shortage of resources and lack of ongoing support system. The study suggests that English teachers should be trained separately focusing teaching English as a language unlike other subjects.*

**Keywords:** Language Skills, Rural Pakistan, Secondary Level, Teaching of English

### INTRODUCTION

The growing need and importance of English language at the present day has made the acquisition of this language as an important requirement for today's student. As English is perceived as an indispensable tool in order to survive in the global economy, the demands for English language have grown (Paik, 2008). Despite the importance and need of English language, it has generally been observed in the developing context especially in context of Pakistan that students having strong language competencies easily get entry into higher institutions while such entry is denied to those who have poor background in English language. The importance of English language is even more intense at secondary level as this transitional stage prepares learners either to be an earning member for the family through joining various trades or enter higher institutions with sound background. As Jimenez and Rose (2010) believe, "Without a sustained and systematic effort, students in the process of learning English have almost no hope of acquiring the kinds and amounts of cultural, social, and academic capital that they need to move into higher education or meaningful work" (p.411). As a result, English language has been a means of either success or failure. Support for this interpretation comes from Zeegers(2005) who argues that it is the language which facilitates all other learning and all learning failure is language failure.

Since teaching has the major role in facilitating the acquisition of English language, teaching English has been a point of concern for academicians and practitioners. Teaching English is not merely transmitting information to the learners rather it is to enable them speak, read and write fluently (Patil, 2008). However, the common observations in Pakistan especially in rural contexts reveal that the graduates coming out of schools have hardly any command on the language skills. It has generally

been believed that the learners could gain command over the language skills if they are exposed to language development activities (Watkins, 2007). This raises the question whether the teachers in developing context especially in rural Pakistan aim at a balanced and integrated development of all the basic skills of English language. This paper aims at exploring the instructional techniques of English teachers at secondary level to understand their approach towards teaching of English and the extent they expose learners to various language skills.

### Teaching of English

A generally believed fact is that without being aware of the aims of any task, its desired result cannot be achieved. To make learning much effective and systematic, teachers should be clear about the long term goals and specific aims of teaching English (James, 2001). The aims of teaching English at secondary level are manifolds, such as to equip learners with the four language skills; listening, reading, speaking and writing. Listening is considered to be the very basic and important skill of any language. Listening provides base for the other language skills. According to Shahid, (2002, p. 210), "Listening is a process which involves perceiving that there is a systematic message, in a continuous stream of sound and then apprehending and identifying within this stream bounded elements the listener has never heard in exactly this form before". It suggests that listening skill requires profound knowledge of phonology or sound system of the language. If we follow the natural approach of language-learning, listening is to be the first step in language acquisition. Listening exercises must be constructed carefully and step-by-step (Brown and Yule, 1999). There is a strong argument for spending more time training pupils' listening skills before we introduce them to more complex oral exercises (Barton, 2006). The teacher should also ensure that the learners know the words happening in the listening activity. The students should be told about the reason or the purpose of the activity i.e. what they are supposed to do after listening and why they are given this training.

According to the natural approach to language acquisition, speaking is the next language skill after listening. The speaking skill requires the correct use of vocabulary items, the ability to recall words spontaneously and grammatical accuracy. Moreover, speaking also demands correct pronunciation, fluency in producing rhythm, stress and intonation. Overcoming all these aspects makes learning spoken language as the most difficult task for both teachers and students (Brown and Yule, 1999). Speaking serves the main purpose of language that is to communicate and to establish social relationship. If a language is to be acquired for the communicative purpose, speaking is the foremost means of communication. Therefore, the most important skill that the learner requires is the oral skill or the speaking skill and the main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking is oral fluency. According to Wyse and Jones (2001, p. 190), "It is important that teachers recognize their own histories and status as language users, and resist the temptation to impose their own social criteria on the child's ongoing language development". Therefore, the teacher should know the process of language learning especially regarding speaking and try to follow the same process in the classroom. The obvious function of a teacher is to direct and control learners activities; what they are to do, how to do and when to do (Mercer, 1998). Students should be encouraged to speak and their errors have to be ignored. As Baker and Westrup (2000, p. 80) opine, "Students are learning when they make mistakes or help to correct other students' mistakes".

All new learning comes through reading, so reading is very important language skill. The education of a child is imperfect unless he is equipped with the ability of reading to interpret and understand the contents of a reading material. Therefore, Dr. West gives more emphasis upon the reading skill. In reading, the reader's goal is to understand and absorb the writer's purpose. Students need a reason to read which can be achieved by setting a meaningful task (Watkins, 2007). The second language learners cannot be made effective readers unless they are taught the skill of reading. Teachers have to use different techniques to teach reading and provide students with practice opportunities. Reading should gradually move from simple to difficult. Kropp (1993) states, "Some children have literally never heard the words or ideas they are being asked to read in books. As a result, reading becomes more frustrating" (p.28). The words related to the experience of the learners and those that have been

known to them by listening and conversation must come first. It should start with blackboard and flash cards not with textbook. Then gradually introducing the techniques of skimming, scanning, predicting, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words etc. will be helpful to acquire fluency in reading.

Writing is translating thoughts into language. As there is no personal contact between the writer and reader, writing should be very neat, simple and clear so that a reader will understand it without any help. The mistakes go unnoticed in speaking that is not so in writing. The learners may gradually be acquainted with the writing techniques. Developing writing skill needs proper guidance by the teacher and constant practice by the students. According to Potts and Nicholas, (1958, p. 17), "... to write well you must be willing to rewrite often, to take your time in writing, and never to be satisfied with less you're your best work". One cannot produce an effective writing until the writing devices are taught and made into use. Since the system of writing differ from language to language, a teacher has to be clear about such differences and train students accordingly (Czerniewska, 1998). Moreover, teachers familiarize students not only with the textual features that are characteristic of genres in different disciplines but also with the forms of thinking that give rise to these genres (Beck, 2009). Therefore, learners should be given opportunity to look at the various written formats because we need different strategies for writing different formats. Like speaking, fluency and correctness in writing comes through regular practice. We should allow our students to write about their ideas, experiences and interests. Teacher should encourage students to write freely and appreciate their efforts. For writing skill, knowledge of grammar is essential. The students also feel difficulty with spellings that discourages the writing skill. Extensive reading practice and constant writing practice will be helpful to solve the spelling problems. Most importantly, a teacher has to understand the typical stages that learners pass through in their writing (Wyse and Jones, 2001).

The literature on various language skills presented above suggests that language is not merely assimilation of knowledge and information rather it is active acquisition of communicative competencies. Such purpose of language has given rise to communicative approach which could help the students grasp how to use target language to communicate appropriately, fluently and effectively by being more concerned with students' initiative and interaction rather than simply with teacher-centered direction (Demirezen, 2011). However, to facilitate language acquisition through communicative approach, the teachers' competency and students' confidence as well as motivation play important role. The studies conducted in Asian contexts reveal that learners in most Asian countries feel shy and nervous while using English (Patil, 2008). In order to overcome the challenge of learners' shyness and enable them speak, read and write English fluently, Patil suggests to create:

opportunities for them to use English in meaningful, realistic, relevant situations. Games, role play activities, information gap tasks, brain storming exercises, riddles, puzzles, cartoons, anecdotes, jokes, songs, and other low-cost and easily available teaching materials come handy. Learners enjoy toying with the language, experimenting with it and gradually but surely feel confident and comfortable with the language. Once they have got rid of fear complex, they try to use English creatively. Since they are not scared of making mistakes, they try to use as much language as they can and in due course of time pick up more vocabulary and structures. (p.239)

However, the above mentioned strategies could be used by a competent and well trained teacher. Unfortunately, lack of trained teachers proficient in the English language has consistently emerged as a big challenge in Pakistan (Aslam, et al. 2010; Behloland Anwar, 2011; Shamim, 2008). In rural context especially in the context of Chitral, English teachers hardly avail any in-service professional development opportunities as neither government nor any NGOs arrange such course for English teachers at secondary level. The pre-service courses have already been considered outdated and instead of practical teaching skills, the emphasis remains on theory (Siddiqui, 2010). Since the ground realities in the rural context differ from other context, there may be different approaches to the teaching of English as a teacher may adopt particular practices which are seen to be appropriate to the specific culture of the teaching situation (Hird, et al, 2000). Thus, it seems an interesting and timely question to explore the instructional practices of secondary level English teachers in Chitral; a rural and mountainous district of Khyber PukhtunkhwaProvince, Pakistan. The study also investigates the reason behind the particular approaches of teachers towards teaching of English.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Since the purpose of the study was to understand the existing instructional practices as well as to reveal reasons behind those practices, a mixed method of research was used during the study. Quantitative approach was required to identify the teaching practices using classroom observation checklist while qualitative approach was necessary to reveal the reasons behind the particular approach through interviews. Out of 100 high schools in the district, 25 schools were selected randomly. While selecting schools, it was kept in mind that the data should represent the whole population and all sectors. For this purpose, sample schools were selected from all sectors and all tehsils of the district. Through this sampling, the researcher visited 13 Public Schools, 5 each Private and Community Based Schools and two Aga Khan Schools in the district. One secondary class from each school and their English teachers were consulted to collect data. Data was collected by personal visit to schools, observing teaching learning processes in the classrooms and interviewing English teachers at Secondary Level.

During this research, classroom observation checklist and interview were used as tools to generate data. Two lessons of each research participants were observed followed by interview. The classroom observation checklist and interviews covered various areas of teaching and learning processes. Questions or items about the techniques of teaching, nature of activities, language skills development areas and the reasons behind the use of different techniques and language skills were included in the checklist and interview tools.

The collected data were constantly arranged and analyzed to find patterns and themes. As a result of the final analysis, the findings are presented below.

## FINDINGS

As emerged from the analysis of the data, the results are discussed under the themes of lesson planning, classroom activities, factors determining the specific approaches to teaching and teachers' professional background of English teachers which emerged as a result of ongoing data analysis.

### Preparing for the Daily Lessons

As observed during the data collection process, most of the English teachers were not used to lesson planning. Only a small number of teachers were found with full or partial lesson plans. It was interesting to note that some of the teachers were not familiar even with the format of lesson planning. These are the teachers who do not have any professional pre-service or in-service training. Moreover, some of the teachers claim that they prepare lessons but not necessarily put them into written form. "I am used to teaching, so everything is in my mind", a teacher reported. Still there was no such evidence as their teaching depicts their preparation. In government and private schools, there was no pressure on teachers from either internal or external sources to prepare lesson plans. The external sources of Aga Khan Schools expect lesson planning from teachers but due to workload, teachers were not fully used to lesson planning. A teacher showed his concern saying, "How can I make lesson plans for the six classes which I have to teach on daily basis". No planning results in no objectives and as during lesson there are no proper activities where it is difficult to relate objectives to activities and to evaluate learning against objectives.

The daily periods of English teachers at secondary level range from three to seven. In average, English teachers teach 5.5 periods daily. The more and less periods have also both positive and negative effects on the teaching practices of English teachers. The workload is a big reason behind the lack of planning and effective teaching. The teachers having fewer periods are mostly those who are involved in overall school management. Some of the headteachers told that since they had to be involved in the managerial activities, they could not pay full attention on teaching. According to the headteachers, in some government schools, teachers' absenteeism was also an issue. The present teachers were

supposed to teach or at least to engage the classes of absent teachers which further increased their work load and affect the quality of teaching.

### **Classroom Activities**

As observed during the classroom teaching, the English teachers' major activities in the classroom are reading the text, translating it into either Urdu or mother tongue. Besides translating the text, the teachers were also found exposing learners to the reading activities. The teachers finish reading and translating the text and then ask students to read. Moreover, they frequently expose learners to loud reading presuming it as an effective strategy to improve the pronunciation of the students. However, some teachers do not favor this approach. Such teachers believe that the need of the students is not only reading skill but other language skills are equally important. They opined that reading is only a way to collect ideas or materials while we collect ideas to present them elsewhere in written or spoken form.

The teachers also teach grammar and there were periods assigned for teaching English grammar in the studied schools. However, grammar is taught through deductive method i.e. telling or teaching the rules first and then giving examples. On the other hand, the English textbooks also contain various grammar exercises. Even these exercises are usually solved by the teachers and students note the correct answer in their textbooks or notebooks. Thus, wherever there are opportunities of learning grammar and practice language skills, students get ready made solutions instead of practicing them practically.

Since the teacher spend most of the classroom time in translation and reading, no other language skills development activities could be observed. Stress on translation and reading hinders in providing room for other language practice. Though the students usually listen to the teachers, it is not helpful to develop their listening skill as the teachers hardly use English language except reading the text. Similarly, speaking skill is also a neglected area in the classroom. Teachers do not have habits of exposing students to the speaking activities. On the other hand, as observed during teaching and learning process, as compare to listening and speaking skills, writing skill development has enough room. But as far as the independent practice of writing is concerned, it still needs further consideration from teachers that what is the best way to develop writing skills. The teachers were observed to expose learners to writing activities but any systematic procedure and guidance from teachers were not found.

### **The Factors Determining the Specific Approach to Teaching**

As presented above, the English teachers occasionally involve learners in language development activities and usually follow translation method. Why do the teachers still use this approach to such large extent? Teachers claim that this way is suitable keeping in view the exam system. "In the exam, the students are supposed to translate English text into Urdu", a teacher made excuse for translation method. Similarly, the ultimate aim of teaching grammar, in the observed classes, was not making the students familiar with basic language structures and using them in real situation but just to prepare them to solve the expected grammar questions in the exam. Again teachers held exam pattern responsible for this particular approach. "We look at the previous question papers and teach grammar accordingly", a teacher commented.

Some teachers responded that they did not know how English could be taught in any other way. A teacher revealed, "This is how I have been taught and I follow that way to teach English". Some teachers told that they had workload which was a hindrance in planning for various language development activities. They were also of the view that doing any other activity in the overcrowded classroom is not possible. Many teachers believed that due to the lack of resources, they did not involve students in different activities. "There are no charts or other resources to engage students in", a teacher reported. They hardly think of other alternatives considering the ready-made sources as the only teaching aids.

Besides, the teachers also show concern about the English textbooks of secondary level. In response to a question during interview as why do they not give language skill development practice to the

students, some of the teachers told that the textbooks had no exercises or materials to engage students in language development activities. Thus, they usually rely on translating and involving students in reading activities. In response to the question as why did they prefer this way, the teachers said that their students should be skillful reader as they have to study different literature throughout their lives to collect materials from. "Giving more and more reading practice to the students, we will be able to develop the reading skills of their learners", a teacher commented.

Thus, as observed during the teaching learning process in the classroom, it is the teacher who remains active most of the time during the lesson. It is against the notion that teacher should be a facilitator. In this situation, one questions the professional background of the teachers as why do they teach the way they teach English. It leads us to the academic and professional background of English teachers in the studied context.

### **Academic and Professional Background of English Teachers**

The qualifications of the teachers teaching English at secondary level in District Chitral range from simple SSC (Secondary School Certificate) to MA. M.Ed. Majority of the teachers among the research participants were BA with either B.Ed or CT qualifications. In response to the question as how do they improve their teaching, the English teachers told that they try to improve their teaching by self-study of available literature. Unfortunately, school based teacher development activities are also lacking in this context which could have provided the teachers with the opportunities of professional growth. On the other hand, according to the observation of the researcher and interview with teachers, most of the teachers were not interested to improve themselves professionally. They did not have habit of peer observation or consulting literature and other professionals to find out their areas for improvement and to overcome them. Moreover, they had hardly any access to in-service courses. According to the response of participants, almost half of them had studied "Teaching of English" in their B.Ed course. A very few English teachers were involved in Short Course Implementation Programme (SCIP) from Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES, P).

### **DISCUSSION**

The data presented above bring forth a number of facts for discussions and considerations. The basic aims of teaching English are to enable students to listen, speak, read and write English while the best English teaching is that where learners are exposed to the activities to achieve above mentioned aims. However, as revealed through this study, in the studied context, learners hardly get proper language development environment in the classroom. Training in listening skill is the most neglected area. Except listening to the teachers who read the text for translation, students do not get any purposeful listening practice. Since listening is the base for acquiring any language, less attention upon this skill affects acquisition of other language skills. On the other hand, reading skill of students is almost satisfactory because they spend most of the class time in reading. However, reading with purpose where students would be able to fully grasp the idea of the text still needs improvement. Moreover, loud reading which most of the teachers expose their learners to should be replaced with other strategies because in real life, students hardly practice or implement loud reading. Though the teachers want to improve pronunciation through loud reading, pronunciation is generally linked to speaking not reading (Watkins, 2007).

Speaking skill is the second neglected area. Since the teachers hardly design activities where students could be provided with opportunities to express them freely, they hesitate to speak English and cannot go beyond reproducing the notes which they have learnt by heart. If the learners are to be motivated towards speaking; we have to ensure that they have adequate opportunities to practice speaking skills (Barton, 2006). Similarly, writing skill which needs creativity, ideas and command over grammar and vocabulary is not fully satisfactory. Teachers do not give proper writing practice to students to enable them use their creativity and ideas whereas learning to write involves learning to use language in a particular context (Emmitt et al, 2003).

Any language can best be learnt through practice. This requires that the teacher should design interesting activities and expose learners to language skill practices as much as possible. Dobinson (2001) believes that although learners can and do learn what teachers teach they also learn simply by exposure to language in lessons and the learning opportunities presented in such situations. But unfortunately, no activities are designed to practice language skills in the context of this study. The teacher transfers information and the learners listen passively. Nowhere students are observed actively involved in activities. Children are motivated in learning foreign language if they find classroom activities and materials interesting and the teacher supportive (Nikolov, 1999). The studies in Asian countries reveal that most students question the traditional authority-based, transmission mode of learning. They wish to participate actively in exploring knowledge and have positive attitude towards working purposefully (Littlewood, 2001). However, they do not have any autonomy to initiate some topic of their interest which could have enhanced their participation as well as learning (Xie, 2009). On the other hand, it has been a tradition in schools to teach English using translation method, the teachers are not innovative and risk taker to try something new as it will demand extra time and energy. They rely on an easy approach; translation method which lays little or no emphasis on the basic language skills (Stern, 1983).

Since the textbook is the most frequently used source in the classroom, the acquisition of language also depends upon the nature of the textbook. One of the important features of the textbook is that the exercises included in the textbook should cover the whole range of language skills (Sahu, 2004). The English textbook used at secondary level either lacks such exercise or the teachers do not expose learners to do those exercises independently. Moreover, there is no doubt that the text book of English at secondary level needs refinement but we should not totally blame the textbook. Text book is only a way or source to guide the teacher toward the objectives. If a teacher knows the aims and techniques of teaching English, s/he can use even the existing text in better way to achieve the desired objectives.

The major hindrance in teaching of English through the latest techniques is the exam system. If a teacher goes beyond the text to make students practice language skills, he or she cannot get reward for them in the exam. The outdated exam system does not match the latest teaching techniques. Keeping in view the exam, the teachers totally focus the text and try to prepare students according to the expected questions in the exam. Passing through such situations, the students come out from school acquiring no language skills satisfactorily.

The academic and professional background of teachers determines the nature of their teaching. As for as the qualifications of English teachers in the study context are concerned, most of the teachers are qualified to teach English at secondary level but it seems that either they have not been trained properly or they cannot implement the strategies of English teaching in the real situation. English teachers are hardly exposed to in-service courses that are very important to keep them abreast with the fresh ideas emerging in the field of English teaching. English is usually taught by those teachers who do not have competency in English language and these teachers teach through translation method, the way they were taught (Siddiqui, 2010). It is noteworthy that various governmental and NGOs conduct in-service trainings for the professional development of teachers in this context. However, teaching of English at secondary level is a neglected area and no effort has been taken by any organization to train the secondary level English teachers in teaching of English at this level. On the other hand, English teachers lack the habits of self-development through reflection, study of literature and getting support from colleagues. As a result s/he follows the trend; the traditional way of teaching English. Similarly, they come to the class without any plan. Teaching without plan is like traveling without being familiar with the way or destination. The teacher safely uses Translation Method as it is easy way and does not need any proper preparation or plan.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the existing approaches of the teachers are not satisfactory if teaching English is developing the language skills of the students. However, the teachers may not be blamed in this regard as there are a number of flaws in the existing system. Without proper training, a teacher might not be familiar with the aims of teaching English. If teaching English is to focus on developing the four

language skills, the pre-service teacher education programs should integrate such contents which will enhance languages skills of teachers who have to teach English (TuzelandAkcan, 2009). It necessitates that the teacher education programmes have to re-evaluate the needs of the teachers and paraprofessionals and to adequately support their training to better serve the needs of English language learners (Lucas et al, 2008;MistryandSood, 2010). Thus, the most important step would be training the English teachers separately, focusing on teaching English as a language and developing the four language skills. Though there are a number of issues related to teaching English which may not be remedied at a time, effective teacher education would be a good strategy to enable teachers teach English as a skill and not as a subject (Siddiqui, 2010). However, such training should not be a one time show, rather English teachers should be provided with the opportunities of ongoing professional development through in-service courses and field based support to keep them abreast with new emerging techniques of teaching English.

Similarly, if we totally rely upon English teachers to develop the English competencies of students, we may not be able to get the desired objectives. For this purpose, both classroom and the whole school should provide supportive environment to students to practice English language without hesitation. To develop competency in a language, the learners must interact in the language (Siddiqui, 2010). Teachers should encourage students to adopt the use of English as a habit as language learning is the process of habit formation (Richardson, 1983). Moreover, the English text book at secondary level should be revised. A book with language activities will be helpful in involving students in learning. The book should cover activities for all the four language skills (Sahu, 2004). Besides, the exam system should be designed in such a way that there should be space to evaluate the four language skills. The inclusion of all language skills in the test papers would make teachers concentrate on all language skills. Lastly, teaching of English at primary level should be refined so that students will enter secondary stage with strong base.

#### **FURTHER STUDIES**

This study has gone some way towards understanding the existing instructional procedures as well as the influencing conditions of English teaching at secondary level schools of rural Pakistan. It has been found that the English teachers do not possess required skills and attitude to teach English as a language. Since the teachers are prepared for the teaching profession through the pre-service courses, studying the curriculum and pedagogy of the pre-service courses would be helpful in finding out how these teachers are trained and what needs improvement in those pre-service courses. Moreover, the teachers claim that the pattern of secondary exam is a hindrance in providing language skill development to the learners, studying teaching of English at middle level would be helpful to understand whether exam is the reason behind the current approach to the teaching of English or we have the same approach to English teaching even in the levels where the teachers themselves prepare test and conduct exams.

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