

## UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN SCHOOLS -A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

English has been allocated an important place in our education policy making especially after the onset of era of globalisation and consequently it has come to play a very significant role in educative process at school level. Numerous endeavours are going on to discover the dynamics of teaching and learning of English language in schools of Punjab. The present study aimed at understanding the various challenges being faced by English teachers in their classroom while striving for making their students proficient in English. For this purpose, qualitative research design has been adopted. An interview schedule was prepared. The sample of the study comprised of 132 English teachers serving in government and private schools of Punjab. The responses of the teachers were content analyzed. The various problems and challenges they are facing while teaching English have been reported and discussed in this research paper.

**Key Words:** Globalization; Education Policy; Teaching of English: Qualitative Research; Content Analysis

### INTRODUCTION

In 1990s, the economic globalisation with the expanding operations of the transnational corporations and development of information technology resulted in the proliferation of use of English language world over. The learning of English language has become an acceptable norm and it has almost replaced the indigenous languages of different countries. This has resulted not only in the spread of English language far and wide but it is also being perceived as language of social and economic mobility. Emphasising on enhanced role of English in today's globalised world, many social theorists have pinpointed that English has become a symbol of prestige and modernity and, as a result, a means of 'social ascension'.

The era of globalisation, initiated a phase of global changes and in this context the English language has become what Bourdieu (1993) calls 'symbolic capital' which people desire so that they can create their access to the global economy. The rise of English as international lingua franca led to make this an acceptable rhetoric, that English language learning open doors for personal and national development.(122).

In this respect, Nino-Murcia in her critical theory claims that globalization and the global market have made English to be a necessity. The basis of her reasoning is the fact that the people, in various countries, learn English for various purposes including better employment and quality education. Learning English for these reasons leads to a general goal of achieving a better life. By learning English, people develop ability to communicate globally from which they have opportunity to access international education and multinational companies as well as build global networking (121).

Thus, the globalisation and the resultant global primacy of English language have resulted into imbedding English language into the different stages of educational policies of various developing countries. It is visible in the form of introduction of English at the earlier stages of

education in various developing countries. These policy shifts have been brought about on the basis of the discourse that it will result into development of human capital with global outlook and will ensure its participation in global economy.

Sayer reported that the trend of extending English language education to public primary schools had been witnessed more specifically in developing countries. The rationale for introducing English at early stage of learning is that gaining English proficiency is the key to opening opportunities for social and economic progression. It was further indicated that teaching learning processes carried out in various types of schools were highly social class specific leading to non-achievement of goal of providing access to equal educational opportunities for different sections of society. He concluded that instructional patterns being followed by different types of schools aiming at development of a specific skill set and behavioural aspects were consistent with the social class to which the students belonged to (43).

It is generally observed phenomenon that socially advantaged children achieve better academically and go further in their educational pursuits. Pierre Bourdieu argues that schools are not neutral settings; as a result, do not provide equal opportunities to its students. Rather these schools reproduce social structure and class relations. In this context, he theorizes that English language has become a cherished 'linguistic currency' which is a form of cultural capital. He further notes that English is a means to acquire status and as a sign of merit (122).

However, the implementation of policies to achieve the goal to create equitable access to English education for all school students is not a flawless process. These policies are not adequately taking into account the available infrastructure and professional preparation of English teachers. As a result such policies have failed to deliver the expected results. The results of various research studies emphasizing English as Medium of instruction indicated that there are four categories of challenges, namely, linguistic, cultural, structural, and identity-related (institutional) challenges and four important aspects of EMI implementation, namely, importance for language improvement, subject matter learning, career prospects, and internationalization strategy.

In the recent past, the Indian education system has also witnessed sea changes in its policies and implementation emphasizing the role of English leaning both at school and higher level education and Punjab is not an exception. In Punjab also, in line with the national policies and global trends, English has been introduced at school level from 1<sup>st</sup> standard as a subject and English as a medium of instruction is also being promoted. Parents these days are also aspiring their children to be proficient in English language, to make them capable of exploring the greener pastures around the globe. To what extent the objectives of introducing these policy have been achieved, is a major question to be answered. In this context, the present study aims at understanding the perception of the teachers about the objectives they are striving to achieve and challenges they are facing while teaching English in their classrooms.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Various researchers have analyzed the significance of learning English language across different cultural contexts. A brief account of them is given below:

Freire believed that an education system is able to justify its existence, if it accelerates the process of social changes which are beneficial for the disadvantaged section of society. Such changes enable them to combat social exploitation due to capitalist system unlike a type of education that does not invite people to question and to reflect on the institutions that serve

them, to reflect on the reality they live in. Problematisation is an essential element for education because it helps both the educators and the learners to enter into the world that is full of possibilities for the transformation of individual and collective lives, and these possibilities end up enriching society and each member living in it (73).

Social prestige is often being linked with education and skills of individuals in which English learning is embedded. Education is perceived to be the way to economic success. Peisker critically theorizes that knowledge in English has become a strong parameter for a class distinction in non-English speaking countries. English is a factor which creates economic and social hierarchy. In many communities, learning English is focussed at fulfilling the English requirement of global market for more income generation. On the other hand, its status leads its learners to gain higher social reputation in their communities (152).

Reproducing the social stratification, the unequal access is further reducing the prospects of socio-economically marginalized groups in higher education and job markets. While for the student, belonging to privileged class, who is well-versed in English and has acquired the latest knowledge, come across ample job opportunities all over the globe, but those students who could not acquire neither English language adequately nor the requisite skill set, usually remain confined geographically as well socio-economically due to lack of economic resources. English education, in this context, leads to social stratification. (Sah and Li 116).

According to the Interactionist theory, language acquisition is outcome of unique and complex interaction between the individual human faculties and the environment. This has largely been based on the theoretical work of Lev Vygotsky and the concept of social constructivism rooted in his socio-cultural perspective on learning. Vygotsky postulates that language acquisition and learning occur out of interactions with other people, especially the more capable others, such as teachers or friends who are more fluent in the language. The partnership between elders and children for problem solving leads to acquisition of L1 by the children. Without this collaboration, language development is not possible. Vygotsky is of the view that it is only through language that the children initiate their community life. The meaning making process in which children involve themselves in their community life results into language development. Similarly, the students learning L2 can learn language with support from teachers and classmates. The teacher can recreate community life through divergent interactive activities. The interactive tasks assigned by teacher will make L2 learners to use language to meaningfully communicate with classmates in the classroom. During this interaction, there may be certain expressions that are not understandable and it is through the process of error corrections that the learners are made to pay attention to the particular language structures. It is claimed that input plus interaction will result into language acquisition or language learning.

According to Richards & Rogers, the basic features of communicative perspective of language include, three aspects. Firstly the language is a system for the expression of meaning, secondly the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication and thirdly the structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses. Thus the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning is exemplified in discourse. (161).

Emphasising the role of students' attainment in the subject of English, Upadhaya and Sah have argued that, in general, access to the working literacy and communicative skills in English is often acknowledged as a tool for socio-economic development in South Asia. The

performance in English is considered important parameter of employability for high-end careers (111).

In the Ugandan context, Kyeyune argued for teacher contemplation and interactive engagement in the classroom and proposed that teachers should be provided training in action research skills to enable them to perform their classroom roles creatively by giving due consideration to varied and individual needs of their learners.(94).

Tang investigated the challenges involved in the adoption of English as medium of instruction and its impact on Thailand International College. It was found that the teachers considered their students capable of taking notes, reading syllabus content and class interaction in English medium. The study concluded by laying emphasis that implementation of English as medium of instruction is quite crucial and same policy may also be adopted in other higher education institutions in Thailand (97).

Multilingualism is the characterising feature of Indian society and linguistic diversity is the norm. In this regard, The NCF states that “India is unique not only in that a large number of languages are spoken here but... There is no other country in the world in which languages from five different language families exist” (37).

To sum up, the present global spread of English is due to a number of factors. Today English has become the only medium of global trade and commerce, science and technology and the internet. It has emerged as a chief communicative tool for inter and intra cultural communication among different peoples in different parts of the world. The findings of the study have narrated a different story. The Acquisition/ Learning Hypothesis states that learners have two distinctive ways of developing competence in L2. Acquisition is the natural way where the learners use language for real communication, while ‘learning’ is where the learners know about the language. Acquisition follows the similar process as is carried out in learning L1. On the other hand, formal teaching is necessary for ‘learning’ to take place. The learning does not result into acquisition (Richards & Rogers 181)

Thus these research efforts highlight the significance English language has gained in today’s globalized world. The role of learning English is to be successful in career and consequent positive transition in social class have encouraged policymakers and all other stakeholders to adopt proficiency in English language as a goal worthy to achieve. Despite several endeavours, there are multilayered issue being faced in realizing this goal. So it is very much pertinent to have insight by English teachers about the challenges being faced in schools of Punjab so that requisite steps can be taken to deal with them effectively.

## **RATIONALE**

The importance of English for social mobility has encouraged government in several countries to focus on English language teaching at schools because learning English has a positive effect on students’ professional and social achievements. In this context, viewing Indian education system, Vaish explicates that the integration of English language to education policy in India is due to perceived belief that English is a resource which becomes instrumental in upward socio-economic mobility and empowerment. Due to high value attached to learning English language, people strongly believe that quality education can only be attained through English medium (201). However, challenges of teaching English may vary from one situation to another as the aim of teaching English should be to develop native like pronunciation and writing skills. Thus as English teachers, the basic objective is to develop communicative proficiency among students. Thus it is equally important to achieve grammatical accuracy, reading comprehension, oral and written proficiency. Further, mastery

over the prescribed syllabus is also very important. To what extent, the teachers are successful in achieving this objective is a question to be answered. Hence the present study aims at analyzing the various challenges being faced by the teachers of English in their classrooms in the context of Punjab.

## METHODOLOGY

**Sample and Sample size:** In the present study, a sample of 132 English teachers from both government and private schools across Punjab has been interviewed.

**Tool:** For this purpose, an interview schedule has been prepared. The following questions were asked.

**Table 1**

### Interview Schedule for School Teachers

**To study the nature of problems being faced by Teachers in different schools of Punjab in teaching and learning of English language**

Sr. No.	Questions
1	What, according to you, is the basic objective of teaching English as a subject at school level?
2	Which approach do you find the most suitable for teaching English to students?
3	Do you use only English language while teaching English or introduce intermittent use of mother tongue of the students?
4	How does students' knowledge of their mother tongue obstruct or help in the process of their English language learning?
5	What kind of problems do you face with regard to the suitability of curriculum taught to the students for achieving learning objectives?
6	Do you teach grammar by first explaining the rules then introducing exercises or vice-versa?
7	Do you find your students sufficiently motivated for learning English language? Yes/No. If not, what could be the possible reasons for it?
8.	What kind of challenges do you face while teaching English to students from varied socio-economic background?
9.	What about the availability and adequacy of infrastructural facilities in your school for conducive language learning process?
10	Any other problem, please specify.

The qualitative data, gathered from these teachers, has been tabulated and content analyzed to get varied perspectives on the various problems being faced by the English teachers in their classrooms.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, a sample of 132 English teachers from both government and private schools, across Punjab, has been interviewed. Their responses were recorded and analyzed. As the learning English language and becoming proficient in it are the goals being strived for, so the primary objective of this study was to understand the various challenges that are being faced by English teachers in their classrooms.

In this framework, the teachers were asked about their perspectives on objectives of teaching English as a subject at school level. Their responses are presented below in Table 2.

**Table 2**

**Basic Objective of Teaching English at School Level**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
Communicative proficiency	110 (83%)
Grammatical accuracy	62 (47%)
Reading comprehension	57 (43%)
Oral proficiency	55 (42%)
Mastery over the prescribed syllabus of English at a particular grade	32 (24%)
Native like pronunciation	28 (21%)
Writing skills	13 (10%)

The Table 2, reveals that in their responses, a significantly large number of respondents (83%) have said that the basic objective is to develop communicative proficiency among students. In their opinion, the other objectives, which are equally important to be achieved, include grammatical accuracy (47%), reading comprehension (43%) and oral proficiency (42%). Further, a considerable number of teachers (24%) have opined that mastery over the prescribed syllabus is very important to strive for. Besides, 21% of these respondents have reported that the aim of teaching English should be to develop native like pronunciation. Also, a few of them (10%) have emphasized on the development of writing skill as the objective of teaching English

Thus, these teachers have primarily emphasised on learning English as medium of communication. For them, it is important to aim at developing proficiency in English among students, so that they not only learn the course content, but also develop grammatically correct expression in both spoken and written forms. Besides, the teachers should aim to develop reading comprehension among students.

Understanding various problems and issues being faced by teachers while teaching a subject is prerequisite for their understanding and striving for their solution. In this context, the school teachers were asked about their perspectives on various problems they come across while teaching English as a subject in their classrooms. When asked specifically, about the problems being faced by them, almost all teachers have reported one or the other challenge which they face in English classroom, which are reported below in the Table:

**Table 3**  
**Problems Faced by English Teachers in Classrooms**

	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
<b>The problems faced by English teachers in the classrooms</b>	Poor grasping power of students with respect to fundamentals of English language	19 (14%)
	Mother tongue interferences	16 (12%)
	Spoken English and Pronunciation	15 (11%)
	Lack of interest and motivation	15 (11%)
	Vocabulary and syntax	14 (11%)
	Socio-economic background and Parental support	14 (11%)
	Classroom Issues	11 (8%)
	Burden of Syllabus	9 (7%)
	Rote memorisation	6 (5%)
	Infrastructure	4 (3%)
	No Problem	9 (7%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>132 (100%)</b>

The above table reveals that these teachers come across varied issues/challenges in their classrooms. Poor grasping power of students with respect to fundamentals of English language is the foremost challenge being faced by them. 14 per cent of the respondents have said that the students are very poor at understanding language concepts which makes the whole process of teaching English an uphill task.

While explaining further, 12 percent of them have revealed that when questions are asked, the students usually respond in vernacular as they had studied in that very medium from the primary level. Another problem they face, as reported by 11 percent of them, is related to the lack of communicative ability in English language. Consequently, being weak in spoken English, adversely affects their level of participation in classroom interaction. The teachers have emphasized that to discourage cramming, the curriculum should be practical oriented. More tasks based on English speaking must be included in curriculum and also be made part of evaluation.

For the success of any teaching learning process, learners' keenness is primary. The teachers (11%) have reported certain psychological challenges, such as lack of interest and motivation among students. According to them most of the times, the students want to learn English, but

at times they may be distracted. They are not sufficiently motivated to maintain interest while learning

Socio-economic status of the students and lack of parental support are other aspects, though beyond classroom, yet have significant implications for English language learning process. According to 11 per cent of the teachers, the students receive almost no positive assistance from parents. As mother tongue is the medium of communication in day to day life, sometimes, it creates obstacles in learning English. Absenteeism is another problem, especially in rural area schools, where the students have to own household responsibility as well. These further results in shortage of time and burden of syllabus make students unmotivated. Many students lack basic grammatical command. Limited vocabulary also comes in the way of expression.

Another 11 per cent teachers have said that, being a foreign language, it becomes difficult sometimes to simplify and explain some of the topics. Most difficult part for the students is to understand new vocabulary. So it is very difficult to make them understand the whole content in English. They don't know how to put thoughts in words. Many students feel that 'it is merely a language and they don't need much effort to gain competence in it'. Lack of self-study and practice by the students also pose hindrance. Students' hesitation and resultant lack of communication affect their learning.

Further, the teachers (7%) have complained about unsuitability of syllabus. They also think that time allocated for teaching English is less than required. The curriculum is an important dimension of teaching learning process. Its aptness is the pre requisite for attaining goals of any course. Teachers' responses were sought regarding suitability of curriculum. Talking about infrastructural issues, some teachers (3%) have said that they have to conduct large classes in small rooms. Limited teaching resources hinder the process of teaching. Many teachers have reported disturbed environment of the class due to large class size. In such environment, the students hijack the lesson.

However, 7 percent of the respondent teachers have expressed that do not face any kind problem in classroom during the teaching learning process. The kind of school, place and kind of social strata the students belong to could be the varied factors that can attributed for this positive response.

The teachers have expressed themselves through the following words.

"The most common problem, I think, related to government school students particularly, is that they get very little exposure of speaking, listening and reading in English. Spelling mistakes and mispronunciation are commonly observed phenomena.' 'Students make mistakes as there are many exceptions to the rules of English. The base of students is not strong. They are habitual to rote memorization than building concepts.' 'The students lack cultural affinity with English. They show inability to grasp and put to use English grammatical concepts. As a result, they feel bored while learning English. I have to motivate them to remove hesitation to speak English. I have to put efforts to make them improve their vocabulary. I guide them in free time and take extra classes. I try to create English speaking environment and build students' confidence level.'

In nutshell, teaching English is not a smooth sailing ship for the teachers. The issues related to curriculum, poor foundation of students with regard to grammatical rules and lack of vocabulary pose a number of challenges for the teachers related to the transmission of understanding while teaching. Thus rote memorization is the only choice the students are left with. Probably due to being less educated, parents of some of the students, are not in the

position to teach them or guide them at home. This lack of support at home results in sole reliance on classroom learning. Moreover, due to poor financial condition of the family, these students need to prioritize work over academics. Under such circumstance, staying away from school not only disrupts the daily learning process, but also builds a gap due to absence from the classes, which becomes difficult to cover especially due to lack of support at home. Besides lack of adequate infrastructural facilities at school prove detrimental to teaching of English in schools. Thus the varied issues being faced by teachers, both in public and private schools of Punjab, but getting advantage of this understanding of problems and coordinating with them to overcome issues would be a welcome administrative step.

### **IMPLICATIONS: THE PRESENT STUDY MAY HAVE THE FOLLOWING IMPLICATIONS**

1. To overcome rote learning, the curriculum may require some revisions to encourage involvement of students, enhance their creative expression and engage them in real life activities and fun learning activities.
2. The administration may take necessary steps to arrange remedial classes for the students weak in vocabulary and grammar.
3. The findings may prove insightful to the administration of both public and private school to take requisite steps to provide infrastructural facilities to create more conducive environment for English learning.
4. The parents can be enlightened about the support they can extend by ensuring regularity of their wards in the school.

### **Scope for future work**

1. The present work may be extended by making a comparative study of the problem faced by public and private schools.
2. The sample size may be increased to have more diversified perspectives.
3. The information may also be gathered from student's perspective and combining with the perspective of teachers would be more insightful.

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