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An Empirical Study of Elementary School Students' English Language Learning Issues

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ABSTRACT

This study examines elementary school pupils' perceptions of grammatical challenges, vocabulary constraints, and pronunciation and fluency issues as they relate to learning English. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data from 517 students (265 males and 252 females) enrolled in English-medium and English-Urdu-medium schools using a quantitative, descriptive-comparative design. The findings show that problems with pronunciation and fluency were regarded as the biggest obstacle, followed by problems with vocabulary and grammar. While medium-based comparisons demonstrated that English-Urdu-medium students faced more difficulties than English-medium learners, especially in grammar, gender-based analysis showed that female students felt these challenges more strongly than male students. The results are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of affective variables, instructional strategies, and language exposure in language learning. In order to address gender- and medium-specific learning challenges and improve early English language proficiency, the study emphasizes the necessity of communicative, context-sensitive teaching strategies, targeted vocabulary and grammar instruction, and differentiated support.

Introduction

English has become an international language that has taken center stage in education, communication and socioeconomic development. In most countries that make English a second or foreign language, formal teaching is introduced in the elementary level. This is an important phase of learning, and it creates the linguistic, cognitive, and affective basis on which future language acquisition will take place. Even with the heightened focus in the early English schooling, many elementary school students have remained to be struggling with constant challenges in learning the English language. Such challenges are of concern insofar as ensuring effectiveness of instructional practices, curriculum design and support systems are concerned to the learners, hence the need to look into this empirically.

Students of elementary school are developmentally different as compared to older students with low cognitive maturity, short attention span, and developing literacy skills. Cameron (2001) notes that young learners learn the language in a different way compared to adolescents and adults because they mainly consider contextualized input, repetition, and interaction. Instructional practices that are not consistent with these developmental requirements tend to confuse learners on simple concepts of language. Therefore, the problems with vocabulary learning, pronunciation, grammar use, and reading



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comprehension are visible at an early age and can be maintained in the further schooling. Limited vocabulary knowledge is one of the most often reported problems in the learning of the English language in elementary schools. Vocabulary is a foundation of language competence and a direct impact of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills of learners. Nation (2013) pointed out that lack of vocabulary size gag or limits the understanding and expression of learners hence hindering the general development of language. Lack of exposure to meaningful input of the English language among elementary students often leads to the memorization of English that leads to superficial learning and not the effectiveness of using the language in practice.

Elementary learners of English also have a significant reading problem. Second language reading involves the combinations of phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary and comprehension. A study by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) brings out the fact that failure to read at the early stages can result in poor performance in the future. Elementary learners do not have an easy time in such aspects of learning as phonics, spelling patterns, and understanding of the sentence, which can be attributed in great part to the lack of instructional support and reading practice.

The other field where elementary students experience problems is oral communication. Little students are usually anxious, lack confidence and fear of doing something wrong especially when speaking the English language. The affective filter hypothesis by Krashen, (1982) explains that anxiety and low levels of motivation are emotional factors that may greatly retard language acquisition. In case classroom conditions fail to promote risks in taking and interaction, the learners might not be active learners who develop confidence to speak and communicate in English.

These problems are further exacerbated by instructional and contextual factors. The English learning experiences of students depends on teacher preparedness, teaching methods, size of classes, and access to learning materials. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), the old-fashioned grammar-centered approaches to teaching still prevail in most elementary schools even though there is evidence on the effectiveness of communicative and learner-centered approaches. Such incompatibilities between the instruction methods and the requirements of the learners usually lead to language developmental discontinuity.

The English learning results among students are also influenced by socioeconomic and sociocultural factors. Students with low socioeconomic status might not be exposed to English outside of the classroom, which means that they do not get chances to reinforce and practice. According to Cummins (2000), the social context of language development is entrenched in social context and the difference of the linguistic input may have a great influence on achievement. The practices of family literacy, parental support and the attitude of the community towards English are all some of the factors that lead to the success or failure of the learners.

As these issues are complex in nature, it is urgently necessary to conduct empirical research studies that ought to explore the nature of English language learning challenges among elementary school children. The evidence-based information of such studies may be used to investigate the linguistic challenges, teaching gap, and contextual limitations. The current research attempts to examine the character of English language learning problems at educational level, including determining the main problem areas and contributing to pedagogical changes. With systemic approaches to these problems, instructors and policymakers can reduce the quality of early English education and empower long-term academic achievement of the learners.

Literature Review



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The learning of the English language in early childhood has attracted much interest in the field of applied linguistics and educational research. Theoreticians are unanimous that elementary school is a very sensitive stage in the language development, at which, students are especially open to new sounds and linguistic structures (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). The success of language acquisition during this stage however, takes place concerning the quality of instruction, the interest of learners, and provision of contextual support.

Young students are not the same as adults as far as cognitive and emotional growth is concerned. The theory of cognitive development as proposed by Piaget suggests that elementary students mainly belong to the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, that is, they learn best when presented with concrete examples of things and meaningful contexts. As stressed by Cameron (2001), language teaching to young learners should incorporate aspects of play, interactions, and contextualized delivery in order to learn. In case these principles are not followed, students might have a hard time internalizing language structures.

Difficulties in Vocabulary

Knowledge of vocabulary is generally accepted as one of the foundations of language proficiency. According to Nation (2013), effective use of language requires a learner to have breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Elementary level students may not have much exposure to English and therefore their vocabulary may not grow. Students can learn vocabularies by heart to pass examinations yet cannot apply the vocabularies in real-life situations.

A study by Proctor, Silverman, Harring, and Montecillo (2012) reveals that vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of young learners have a strong relationship. Lack of vocabulary means that students do not comprehend texts, instructions, and express their ideas orally and in writing. This vocabulary is a failure loop, where a lack of understanding leads to low motivation and interest.

Reading is a multi-linguistic process and incorporates various linguistic processes. According to Snow et al. (1998), reading problems in the early years may be long-term effects of academic performance. Elementary English learners usually have some problems in phonological awareness, decoding, and understanding, especially when their mother tongue is very different than English. Ehri (2005) emphasizes that phonics instruction plays an important part in early reading. Without systematic teaching on phonics, learners might find it difficult to decode unfamiliar words hence read slow and wrongly. Such challenges are worsened in situations where English orthography is dissimilar to the writing systems of the first language of the learners.

Moreover, the absence of age-related reading materials restrains the ability of the students to read. Grabe and Stoller (2011) point out that the development of fluency and comprehension cannot be achieved without extensive reading. When reading is based solely on textbooks, there is not much progress that can be realized in the case of elementary learners.

Language Problems: Speaking and Listening

Communicative competence depends on oral language skills. Nevertheless, the elementary English learners tend to be shy to talk because they are afraid of making mistakes and being judged. According to Krashen (1982), the language input may also be blocked by a high affective filter which is created by anxiety or low self-confidence thus hindering the process of acquisition. The output hypothesis proposed by Swain (1995) goes on to indicate that meaningful language production opportunities are critical in language



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development. Their oral proficiency fails to develop when there is a low input of students in classroom interaction with the teacher and little opportunity to speak out. The speaking activities in the elementary classrooms are usually constrained by large class sizes and time.

Young learners also find listening comprehension difficult especially when the teachers only use English language without providing enough scaffold. According to Rost (2011), in the process of listening, there are strategic processing skills, as well as linguistic knowledge, which is needed. Elementary students who have no exposure to real life spoken English might not be able to comprehend instructions and classroom conversation.

The methodology of teaching is highly important in resolving or complicating the challenges of learners. Richards and Rodgers (2014) note that several classrooms still use the traditional grammar-translation approaches that have focused on accuracy rather than communication. These strategies might not appeal to the young learners and make them use the language at its fullest potential. Professional training and competence of the teachers are also essential. The lack of confidence in teachers in understanding of the English language or the knowledge of the teaching methods might result in the avoidance of the interactive activities, as they do not prefer to work with textbooks. Harmer (2015) points out that successful language teaching involves teachers who provide supportive conditions in which experimentation and interaction can happen.

One of the major determinants of language learning achievement is motivation. According to Dornyei (2001) motivated learners tend to put more effort and persevere even when confronted with challenges. Yet, the motivation of elementary learners is strongly determined by the experiences in the classroom. Monotonous classes, too much correction and not much encouragement can make learning English less interesting.

There is also self-confidence and feelings towards English that influence learning outcomes. Gardner (2010) emphasizes the contribution of attitudes and the integrative motivation in second language acquisition. Students with a negative perception of the English language as irrelevant or aversive can fail to engage in any learning process which will result in poor achievement.

The process of learning language is not autonomous but it is instilled within social and cultural frameworks. According to Cummins (2000), linguistic development of learners is affected by home literacy practices, the involvement of parents and community. The students who are in language rich background have higher chances of success in English learning. However, on the other hand, a rural or low-income learner might not be exposed to English beyond the school setting. These differences help to understand the necessity of interventions at school levels that will recompense environmental disadvantages and offer equal opportunities to learn.

The literature review has also shown that the problems of the English language learning in the elementary level is a complex phenomenon that involves linguistic, instructional, affective, and sociocultural aspects. A lack of vocabulary, reading challenges, low oral proficiency, and poor teaching techniques as well as low motivation are all known to slow down the learning process of the learner. Although the existing literature is a strong contribution to the field, there is a gap that requires empirical research studies that view these problems in a comprehensive manner. This gap is aimed to be filled by the current research, which empirically examines the issue of English language learning among elementary school students.

Research Objectives

To investigate how elementary school pupils perceive difficulties with learning English.

To compare how male and female elementary school pupils view difficulties with learning English.

To examine how elementary school pupils who attend English-medium and English-Urdu-medium



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schools perceive difficulties with learning the English language.

Questions for Research

How do elementary school pupils view issues with learning English?

Do male and female elementary school students perceive English language learning difficulties differently?

Do elementary school students in English-medium and English-Urdu-medium schools perceive English language learning difficulties differently?

Methodology

A quantitative, descriptive-comparative research design was used in this study to examine how elementary school pupils perceived difficulties with learning English. Elementary school pupils enrolled in English-medium and English-Urdu-medium schools made up the population. A total of 517 students—265 male and 252 female—were chosen through stratified random sampling. A self-created structured questionnaire based on three dimensions—pronunciation and fluency problems, vocabulary constraints, and grammatical difficulties—was used to gather data. A five-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, was used to gauge responses. Subject matter experts evaluated the instrument to guarantee content validity, and Cronbach's alpha was used to determine reliability. SPSS was used to analyze the data, using independent samples t-tests to compare perceptions according to gender and instruction medium and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to look at overall perceptions. A significance level of 0.05 was used to interpret the results.

Table 1

Elementary School Students' Perception Regarding English Language Learning Problems

Challenges in English Language Learning	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Grammatical Difficulties	517	3.89	.711
Vocabulary Limitations	517	3.98	.696
Pronunciation and Fluency Issues	517	4.08	.475

Table 1 shows the general perceptions of elementary school students on the problems of learning English language. The results show that students see the pronunciation and fluency problems as the most significant one ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .475$), then the vocabulary limitation ($M = 3.98$, $SD = .696$). Grammatical problems were also reported as well ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .711$) but not as high as the other two areas. The fact that the mean scores are relatively high in all the three dimensions implies that there are significant challenges faced by elementary school students in learning English. These findings directly respond to the first research question because they outline important problem areas that prevent effective learning of the English language at the elementary level.

Table 2

Elementary School Male Students' Perception Regarding English Language Learning Problems

Challenges in English Language Learning	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Grammatical Difficulties	265	3.87	.713



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Vocabulary Limitations	265	3.79	.707
Pronunciation and Fluency Issues	265	3.94	.474

Table 2 shows the perception of the male elementary school students concerning the problems related to the English language learning. The findings indicate that male students perceived pronunciation and fluency as the greatest challenge ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .474$). This was then succeeded by grammatical problems ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .713$) followed by vocabulary restrictions which were reported at a slightly lower level ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .707$). In general, the average scores show that male students have significant problems in all three dimensions of learning English. The findings are used to answer the second research question by offering a gender-specific insight into the problem of English language learning in the elementary level.

Table 3

Elementary School Female Students' Perception Regarding English Language Learning Problems

Challenges in English Language Learning	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Grammatical Difficulties	252	3.93	.709
Vocabulary Limitations	252	4.18	.629
Pronunciation and Fluency Issues	252	4.22	.437

Table 3 shows the perceptions of the female elementary school students on the problems of learning the English language. The results have shown that pronunciation and fluency problems were viewed as the most significant problem ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .437$), then closely followed by vocabulary constraints ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .629$). There was also a high level of grammatical problems ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .709$). All in all, the fact that the mean scores are higher in all three dimensions suggests that female students experience the problems of learning the English language more severely than their male colleagues. These findings can answer the second research question by demonstrating the differences between genders in their perceptions of English language learning problems in the elementary level.

Table 4

Elementary School English Medium Students' Perception Regarding English Language Learning Problems

Challenges in English Language Learning	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Grammatical Difficulties	217	3.91	.717
Vocabulary Limitations	217	3.86	.686
Pronunciation and Fluency Issues	217	3.95	.492

Table 4 depicts the perception of English language learning issues among the English-medium elementary schools students. The findings show that the perceived problems were pronunciation and fluency ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .492$), then grammatical problems ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .717$). The level of vocabulary limitations was also comparatively lower ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .686$). On the whole, the average scores indicate that English-medium students have



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moderate to high levels of difficulty in learning English. The findings help to answer the third research question by giving an insight into the perceived English language learning problem by the English-medium students in elementary levels.

Table 5

Elementary School English Urdu Students' Perception Regarding English Language Learning Problems

Challenges in English Language Learning	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Grammatical Difficulties	300	4.22	.694
Vocabulary Limitations	300	4.11	.628
Pronunciation and Fluency Issues	300	4.17	.433

Table 5 shows the attitudes of students studying in English-Urdu-medium elementary schools towards the issues of the English language learning. The results show that grammatical problems were rated as the most severe ($M = 4.22$, $SD = .694$), then came pronunciation and fluency problems ($M = 4.17$, $SD = .433$) and vocabulary limitations ($M = 4.11$, $SD = .628$). The fact that the mean scores in all three dimensions are high indicates that English-Urdu-medium students have a significant challenge in learning English. These students seem to face heavier burdens as compared to English-medium students. These findings respond to the third research question by indicating medium-based variations in the perceptions of elementary students on the issues of learning English language.

Main Conclusions

According to the data analysis, the research finds that the elementary school students have significant English language learning issues, especially in pronunciation and fluency, vocabulary, and grammar. Among them pronunciation and fluency turned out to be the most important problem in general. Gender analysis showed that the female students had a stronger perception of the problems of English language learning compared to the male students, particularly in pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary. In addition, medium-based comparisons indicated that English-Urdu-medium students experienced much more problems in all dimensions than English-medium students, and grammatical problems were the most evident. These results indicate that the linguistic skill areas, gender, and medium of instruction affect the issues of English language learning at the elementary level and indicate the necessity of the specific instructional methods and interventions that are sensitive to the context.

Discussion

The results of this research give empirical evidence to the existing literature on the challenges of learning English language in the elementary level. On the whole, students rated the levels of difficulty as high in all three dimensions, and pronunciation and fluency were found to be the most critical issue. This finding is in line with the affective filter hypothesis suggested by Krashen (1982) which underlines that anxiety and less exposure to the use of the authentic language impair oral proficiency. Lightbown and Spada (2013) also reported similar results and stated that young learners tend to have problems with speaking because they have little interaction and practice with speaking in classrooms. The second most important challenge that the elementary students faced was vocabulary limitations. This observation is in line with Nation (2013), who pointed out that vocabulary



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knowledge is limited thus limiting learners in understanding texts and communicating their ideas effectively. Proctor et al. (2012) also discovered that vocabulary depth is a strong predictor of reading comprehension in young learners, and vocabulary deficits may have an indirect impact on the overall language proficiency. The mean scores are high in the current study, and it could suggest that elementary students are not properly exposed to meaningful and contextualized instruction of vocabulary.

The grammatical problems, which were not as evident as the pronunciation and vocabulary problems, were still rated high. This observation is in line with the observation made by Ellis (2006) who posited that grammar acquisition during early language learning is not easy when rules take center stage in teaching as opposed to meaningful application. The findings indicate that the teaching of grammar in the elementary level might not be well coordinated with the communicative and developmental requirements of the young learners.

Gender-based differences showed that, female students had stronger perceptions of the English language learning issues than the male students in all the dimensions. This observation is in line with previous research indicating that female students tend to be more academically conscious and sensitive to the learning difficulties (Gardner, 2010). Although females might be more motivated, they can also be more self-critical and this increases perceptions of difficulty. Dornyei (2001) has also observed that the perceptions that learners hold about themselves play a major role in the way they assess the experiences they have of learning a language.

One of the greatest results of the research was medium-based differences. English-Urdu-medium students indicated that they had more problems in the three areas than English-medium students. This outcome is consistent with the theory of linguistic interdependence proposed by Cummins (2000) that states that the lack of exposure to the target language has a harmful impact on the development of proficiency. Students that learn in English-Urdu-based environments probably receive less regular English exposure, which can be one of the reasons behind their increased perceived difficulty. The same conclusions were made by Richards and Rodgers (2014), who underlined that the exposure to the language and the learning environment is crucial in the process of acquiring the second language.

On the whole, the results prove that the problems of English language learning in the elementary level are multidimensional and are influenced by the instructional context, the characteristics of learners, and the exposure to English. The findings highlight the importance of communicative instructional methods, more oral language practice, and differentiated instruction especially in English-Urdu-medium students. By matching the instructional practices to the developmental and linguistic needs of the learners, it is possible to address these challenges to a considerable degree, and enhance the outcomes of the English language learning.

Recommendations

Enhance Pronunciation and Fluency: Teachers must include communicative and interactive activities like role-plays, storytelling, and oral presentations to give students a lot of practice in speaking and minimize language anxiety, which is the main problem of studying English.

Develop Vocabulary and Grammar: Teaching must be taught contextually and task based such as semantic mapping, reading comprehension activities and communicative grammar tasks, to reinforce vocabulary and grammar acquisition and facilitating meaningful language use.



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Gender and Medium Differentiation of Instruction: Female students and English-Urdu-medium students indicated more issues; hence, specific assistance, more English practice, multimedia materials, language clubs, and feedback should be offered to address the needs of various learners and enhance the general level of proficiency.

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