Teaching English Language at SSC Level in Private Non-Elite Schools in Pakistan: Practices and Problems

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Abstract

English language is taught as a compulsory subject up to graduate level in Pakistani educational system. Despite studying English for over 14 years, majority of students coming from non-elite schools, lack required command in English language skills to pursue their higher education and professional careers. With this background in mind, the current research focused on teaching English reading and writing skills and the problems faced while teaching these skills at Secondary School Certificate (SSC) level in private non-elite schools in Karachi. The sample of the study comprised 20 SSC level students, 12 SSC level English language teachers of non-elite private schools and 5 student notebooks. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires, group interviews and notebook analysis. Data were examined using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teaching English language reading practices include reading the text aloud, translating the chapter, providing the central idea and meanings of difficult words to the students. The major problems faced by the teachers in teaching reading skills are learners' lack of interest in reading, lack of concentration and low reading comprehension skills. The study also revealed practices of teaching writing skills such as provision of model texts and relevant vocabulary items. The major problems while teaching writing skills are lack of pre-writing activities, learners' deficient command over

vocabulary, grammar, spellings and punctuation, lengthy syllabus and limited time.

Keywords: English language teaching, reading skills, SSC level, writing skills.

Introduction

English language runs like blood in the veins of nations worldwide (Ahmed & Rao, 2012). As a result, the demand for English language has increased to the extent that it requires the citizens of modern societies to be proficient enough in order to be successful in their academic and professional careers (Muhammad, 2011). In order to get success and to pursue their studies further, students are required to write with precision and originality and read with an appropriate level of comprehension (Nasir, Naqvi, & Bhamani, 2013). Writing is a key skill within the process of learning the English language as it offers a way of communicating one's thoughts and feelings. Pakistani secondary school students require writing skills for a number of educational purposes including writing tasks given by the teachers and taking tests and final examinations (Dar & Khan, 2015). Moreover, for the purpose of developing writing skills, effective reading skills are also required. Reading a variety of genres effectively helps learners to be efficient writers as they learn the sentence structures, vocabulary and style of writing from the texts they read. Thus, both skills are equally important and dependent on each other (Moureau, 2015).

Despite an asserted focus on English language in Pakistani schools, "The language learners still face difficulties in almost every area: reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar…" (Dar & Khan, 2015, p.122). One reason behind this situation is negligible implementation of skill-based language teaching at SSC level because the focus of teachers and students is on completion of syllabus and preparation for board examinations instead of skills building. Since the medium of instruction in many Pakistani secondary level schools is English and resource books and other instructional materials are mostly in English language (Khan, 2013), it is necessary for the students to have command in at least reading and writing skills to comprehend and produce learning at a desirable level.

Problem statement

In Pakistan, English language is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of education (Shoukat & Ghani, 2015). In elite schools, the entire education is in

English language, but in non-elite schools, students' exposure to English language is limited (Yaqoob & Zubair, 2012). Pakistani non-elite secondary schools cater to learners from the majority of our population, yet students completing their SSC from these schools face difficulties in English language reading and writing (Muhammad, 2011); as such, this provides the first justification to carry out this study.

Many studies have been conducted on closely related issues such as, conditions under which English is taught in Pakistan (Warsi, 2004), English language teaching in public and private sector (Channa, 2017), elite and non-elite schools (Khattak, 2014), problems related to English language teaching in Pakistan (Shamim, 2017), writing problems faced by the learners (Aqeel & Sajid, 2012), second language reading instruction in Pakistan (Bhatti, 2013) and teaching reading skills difficulties (Rasheed, Saleem, Bukhsh, & Rasul, 2011). However, as per available record, no study has been conducted on teaching English language reading and writing skills practices and problems at SSC level in non-elite schools, which provides room for this study.

Research question

This study endeavored to answer the following research question:

What are the practices of teaching English language reading and writing skills at SSC level in private non-elite schools in Karachi, Pakistan?

Literature Review

The ever-growing need of English language in different domains of human life, that is, education, economics, politics, entertainment, technology and business, has created a huge demand for English language teaching around the world (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). Initially, English language classrooms were teacher-centered, where teachers served as a source of knowledge and learners were passive (Boumova, 2008). This traditional practice became so widespread that its traces are found in many modern classrooms. Boumova further highlights that the traditional approach, besides focusing on memorization, also assumes that language learning stands for developing a large collection of grammatical rules and vocabulary which should be produced accurately in suitable situations. White

(1988) adds that language skills and communicative competence are not targets of traditional language teaching.

Regarding modern language teaching, Richards (2008) underscores that current language teaching practices consider learners as the most important element of the entire teaching and learning process and teachers are facilitators and observers of learners' progress. Moreover, Richards emphasizes that modern English language teaching practices aim to develop the ability of meaningful communication. Boumova (2008) explains that in modern English language classrooms, structural elements of the English language, such as grammar and lexicon are mostly taught with reference to contextualized communication rather than in isolation. Boumova further emphasizes that the most notable aspect of modern practices, which was purely absent from the traditional practices, is the extreme focus on basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Writing is the most challenging skill of the English language and there is a meaningful link between the writing produced by students and classroom instructional practices (Fisher, 2012). Even though writing is a very important skill, English language teachers give less time to writing practice (Cutler & Graham, 2011) and focus on the length of writing rather than on ideas and critical thinking (Kiuhara, Steve & Leanne, 2009). Furthermore, Troia (2014) reiterates that established writing teaching methods are not implemented and Khan (2011) accentuates that the prescribed textbook is considered as the only source of knowledge in the classroom and rote learning is promoted. Shah, Rani, Mehmood and Irm (2013) affirm that even in essay writing tasks, students are provided with model essays which they are required to memorize and reproduce in the exam.

Vazir and Ismail (2009) note that in a traditional English language class, the teacher first reads a model of a particular genre, then asks relevant questions, followed by writing of difficult words from that model text on the blackboard and lastly, students repeat the words in a chorus. According to Khan (2011), Pakistani English language teachers are familiar with some writing skill techniques, such as, brainstorming, outlining and pre-writing discussions on the topic, but most of them do not apply these approaches in classrooms because of various reasons that include restricted curriculum, lack of time and learners' weak educational background (Warsi, 2004).

While teaching writing skills, the major problems encountered by the teachers include students' lack of command over grammatical patterns and vocabulary, lack of interest, motivation and less time for writing practice (Almubark, 2016). There are also some teacher related problems, such as teachers' focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than writing skills, lack of constructive feedback and explicit correction of spelling and grammar (Aqeel & Sajid, 2014; Khan, 2011). Not only is writing important, reading is highlighted as a long lasting expertise to be utilized both at school and all through life. According to Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985), reading is an essential and fundamental ability. Rereading is also considered one of the most difficult territories in the instructional framework (Snow 1998). However, Grabe and Stroller (2002) reflect that L2 students are not given much time to create solid reading capacities.

Muhammed (2011) considers reading as the most neglected skill in the English language especially in the Pakistani context. Concurring with this view, Jarvis and Szmczyk (2010) believe that grammar, composition, speaking and listening skills are the main focus and reading activities and tests are considered as time consuming and boring. Elaborating on this aspect, Liu (2008) affirms that reading as a skill has always been neglected in secondary schools in South Asia because teachers teach reading without focusing on comprehension using the read aloud technique. Moreover, Wyatt (2012) states that teacher's lack of command on reading skills and lack of training are considered challenges for teaching reading skills. Some of the major challenges faced by teachers in teaching reading skills are students' lack of vocabulary, interest in reading activities and large classroom (Bhatti, 2013; Rasheed, Saleem, Buksh & Rasul, 2011).

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method. Sample of this study consisted twelve SSC level English language teachers, twenty SSC level students and five student notebooks. Five of the teachers had MA degree in English, four had BA degrees, two of them were B.com and one had only HSC. Teachers' English language teaching experience ranged between one and half years to eight years, but most of the teachers had five years English language teaching experience. Data were collected via an open ended questionnaire, focus group interviews and students' notebooks analysis from three selected private non-elite schools in Karachi. The questionnaire was administered to the teachers and

five group interviews were conducted with the students which were recorded and transcribed. Five English language notebooks of the students were also analyzed. Thus three sources of data were used to triangulate the data.

Open ended questionnaire and interview protocol were developed by the researchers and checked for validity. The researchers also took two experts' opinion on the tools which were also piloted and changes as suggested by the experts and noted at piloting stage were incorporated. Student participants' Urdu responses were translated in English and the translation was validated by two experts. Prior to interview, participants' consent was taken via a consent form to ensure ethical considerations. Participation in this study was voluntary and they could exit from the study any time they wanted.

Findings

Findings of this study have been discussed under four headings: (a) teaching English language reading skills, (b) problems in teaching English language reading skills, (c) teaching English language writing skills and (d) problems in teaching English language reading skills. Code TP has been used for teacher participants and SP for student participants. Findings from teachers are derived from analysis of questionnaire data and findings from students have been assimilated from analysis of focus group interview data and student English language notebooks.

Teaching English language reading skills practices

The findings from the questionnaire administered to teachers showed that English Language Teachers (ELTs) used text books to teach reading skills; TP7 explained that they mostly used prescribed reference books. Some of the teachers elaborated that they also took help from internet and newspapers for teaching reading skills. Included below are quotes from the questionnaire responses of teacher participants. One of them, TP 9 specified:

> *"We prefer the students to read good English books from internet, novel and newspapers."*

Furthermore, most teacher participants responded that they explained the central idea of the text before assigning any reading activity. TP1 shared the

following response:

> *"I first explain them the concept and then make them read the chapter after which they are asked some questions about specific information from the chapter."*

The practice of translating the chapter for the general idea was also one of the key practices in teaching reading skills; TP 9 responded in the questionnaire:

> *"The general idea of the chapter is taught by explaining the chapter in detail with translation."*

The focus of most of the teachers was on pronunciation rather than understanding of the text while reading. TP4 underscored:

> *"I ask them to read the text no matter they come across any unfamiliar vocabulary."*

TP10 had the following view to share:

> *"I ask them to read in a proper manner with correct pronunciation, I given them lectures about silent letters."*

Teachers were also asked about their strategy to teach difficult words to the students while reading. They mentioned that they gave meanings of the difficult words to the students themselves or by writing the meanings of the difficult on the board. However, there was an exception seen in the strategies because TP3 explained the following:

> *"I ask the students to use contextual cues to infer meanings."*

Regarding findings from students, which emerged after data analysis of their interviews, most students affirmed that teachers first read the text themselves, then asked students to read it aloud and then silently; further they translated the

entire text in Urdu before attempting comprehension questions. SP 1 said:

> *"The teacher reads the entire text at first then asks students to read aloud then read silently. Later on, she works on the questions and answers part."*

Some students elaborated that there were times when some of the teachers explained the meanings of unfamiliar words during reading. In this regard, SP2 said:

> *"The teacher also explains the difficult words from the entire lesson."*

Moreover, some students highlighted that the teacher explained the gist of the entire lesson before reading. SP 1 and SP4 agreed on this practice employed by the teacher. SP4 shared the following perspective:

> *"Yes, the teacher explains the gist of the entire lesson in the beginning."*

Additionally, teachers also corrected students' pronunciation mistakes during the read aloud segments and explained meanings of difficult words. SP4 had this to say:

> *"The teacher pronounces the difficult words and explains the meanings as well."*

Students also noted that some of the teachers elaborated on suitable usage of difficult words by using them into sentences. SP10 said the following:

> *"The teacher uses difficult words into sentences to explain where and how to use them."*

Regarding analysis of the notebooks, it was noted that most part of the notebooks comprised answers to text related questions and other exercises such as fill in the blanks and sentences that followed the reading texts. Reading comprehension was also assessed through questions requiring lengthy responses. It

was also noticed that answers to the comprehension questions were directly copied from the text book chapters. In some of the notebooks, reading comprehension passages, outside the textbook, were also attached. While making corrections of the reading comprehension answers, the teachers only underlined the spellings, punctuation, capitalization and sentence structure mistakes and did not point out comprehension related mistakes.

Problems in teaching English language reading skills

The foremost challenges that teachers encounter while teaching reading skills included lack of interest and concentration on the part of the students. An excerpt from the questionnaire response of TP4 is the following:

> *"The students show lack of interest in reading. If a chapter is long, it takes time to motivate them."*

Many of the ELTs also considered students' weak language understanding a challenge; TP9 shared the following standpoint:

> *"Students of secondary classes cannot read properly and lack understanding."*

Moreover, there were teachers who regarded pronunciation as the greatest difficulty. TP2 and TP3 affirmed that teaching pronunciation was quite challenging. This pronunciation difficulty was also voiced by the students. Almost all the participants echoed what SP6 said that it was quite challenging for them to pronounce difficult words from the text appropriately. In the words of SP6:

> *"While reading in the class, we cannot pronounce the words."*

Teaching English language writing skills

Pertaining to data about classroom practices for teaching writing skills, teachers' responses indicated that they assigned tasks to students to collect information about the writing topics form internet and books; TP-2 provided the following input:

"I ask the students to collect material from internet and other books."

The teachers also provided students with a list of vocabulary which students were required to use in their writing. TP-5 elaborated:

"Word bank is provided to the students according to the topic."

Furthermore, some teachers assigned mind mapping activities to students in writing tasks; an extract from responses of TP4 is the following:

"Mind mapping is used to improve the writing organization."

Other teachers stated that they provided sample reading material for teaching writing skills, brought sample essays to the class and developed writing skills by showing practice material.

According to students, English language teachers mostly included questions and answers related to the lessons from the textbook, words meanings and compositions including essay writing, formal and informal letters, precise writing, application writing etc. SP8 explained further:

"We write applications like two days leave, words meanings, questions and answers, thank you letters and informal letters in the class."

While examining notebooks of the students for writing skills, it was noticed that the language (sentence structure and vocabulary) used in essays, applications, letters and short notes were very traditional and similar. To cite an example, almost every application started in the following way: *with due respect, I beg to state that…* and ended with, *I shall be highly grateful to you for this act of kindness.* Same was the case with letters, as every letter to the editor began with, *through the column of your newspaper, I would like to draw the attention of…* and ended with, *I will be very thankful to you if you publish these few lines in your esteemed paper….* Essays in the notebooks on any topic also had old information, to cite just one example, an essay written on *terrorism* mainly dealt with 9/11 and recent events of terrorism were ignored. This showed that the teacher either dictated the essays to the students or wrote for them on the board or photocopies (notes) were given to them. In fact,

creativity and effort on the part of the students were minimal.

Problems in teaching English language writing skills

While highlighting problems related to teaching writing, the teacher participants responded that the students didn't have any ideas to begin a writing task. They felt that this was one of the major challenges they faced while teaching writing skills. TP12 explained:

"The students lack in producing substantial ideas and information to write."

Moreover, most of the teachers regarded lack of vocabulary as the main issue when they gave any writing task to the students. They also specified that the students used incorrect grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization while writing. Following was the perspective of TP1:

"Students are not perfect in spellings and in using grammatical structures."

This aspect was further highlighted by TP9:

"The students do not understand where to use capital and small letters and how to punctuate their writings."

Some of the teachers also regarded that a strict policy of the administration to complete the entire course in a limited time period also created a problem. TP2 elucidated:

"...less credit hours do not allow focusing on writing skills...syllabus completion requires more time."

According to the students, most of them were unable to use proper punctuation marks, correct spellings and suitable words while writing. Some of the students also mentioned their difficulties regarding grammatical aspects as they faced difficulties in translating Urdu sentences into English and changing tenses. SP9 explained:

> *"…while writing applications I am unable to use correct punctuation marks like commas, full stops etc., and unable to change the tense and translate English sentences into Urdu…."*

Further frustration of students was indicated by a remark made by SP 12:

> *"I use unfit words while writing."*

According to some students when they use incorrect spellings, punctuation marks, inappropriate words, wrong translation and grammar, then in response to such mistakes, a majority of teachers' simply underline or circle the errors in their notebooks just to point these out. A few students, however, said that some teachers did incorporate corrections as well. Regarding not making any corrections, SP7 said:

> *"The teacher points out mistakes by circling them with red pen."*

SP 5 substantiated what SP7 had said in the following manner:

> *"The teacher only underlines the mistakes."*

On the other hand, SP 9 declared that:

> *"The teacher also corrects and grammar and translation."*

SP 3 also said:

> *"The teacher tells spellings and meanings of difficult words."*

However, notebook analysis also revealed that most of the teachers only underlined spelling, vocabulary and grammatical mistakes.

Discussion

One of the major reading skills practices, as found in the study, is that of students reading the text aloud. Liu (2008) has also elaborated upon the practice of reading the text aloud. Some other practices of reading skills that findings of this study reveal include focus on pronunciation and teachers providing central idea of the chapter to students before the students read the chapter. Furthermore, the teacher translates the chapter in Urdu, and main source of teaching reading skills remains the text book. Furthermore, teachers provide meanings of the difficult words, in some cases teachers also suggest students to read from internet and books (other than text book), they also explain suitable usage of the words. Students' notebooks analysis also reveals that they copy answers to the comprehension question from the text book. Problems faced by English language teachers in teaching English language reading skills cover students' lack of interest in reading skills, short concentration and low reading comprehension. Bhatti (2013) finds similar results for problems of reading skills in English language.

While teaching writing skills, most of the teachers teach the same genres of writing. They heavily rely on textbook and model writings that subsequently hinder learners' creativity and freedom of expression. Such practices are in line with the findings of Warsi (2004). Corresponding to the findings of (Vazir & Ismail, 2009), provision of relevant vocabulary items to the students for producing a piece of writing was also found in this study. As identified by (Khan, 2011), some of the teachers also realize the importance of pre-writing activities like brainstorming, for the sake of bringing coherence and organization in their writings but most of the time they cannot practice it because of variant problems and challenges.

While teaching writing skills, ELTs were found to be struggling with the challenge of learners' lack of ideas to start a writing activity. this can be due to the absence of planning and pre-writing activities. Problems faced while teaching English language writing skills also cover learner's deficient command over vocabulary, grammar, spellings and inappropriate use of capitalization in writing. Teacher feedback was missing while analyzing student notebooks; the teachers in most cases only underlined the problem and did not recommend the correct form; Aqeel and Sajid (2014) also observed a similar practice. Parallel, to the findings of Cutler and Graham (2011), dealing with a restricted and lengthy syllabus within a short time period is also found to be a major challenge faced by the teachers while

teaching writing skills.

Conclusion

This research conducted a research study to explore teaching English language reading and writing practices and problems at SSC level in private non-elite schools. Findings of this study report some traditional practices of teaching reading skills in Pakistani context such as reading aloud, teaching pronunciation in reading, translating the text in Urdu. The findings also reveal that reading practices are not limited to the text books only; teachers also use other sources such as internet for the reading practice. Writing skills practices also include common traditional writing practices such as over reliance on limited model essays, memorization of essays, though some activities such as brainstorming in pre-writing phase were also reported. This study also explored problems faced during teaching reading and writing skills. Problems faced by the ELTs in teaching English language reading skills include students' lack of interest in reading skills, short concentration and low reading comprehension. While teaching writing skills, ELTs also encountered learners' lack of ideas to start a writing activity, limited vocabulary, grammar, spellings and inappropriate use of capitalization in the learners' writing. Teachers' feedback was missing while analyzing student notebooks, the teachers in most of the cases only underlined the problems. These findings are based on the data collected only from three selected non elite private English medium schools; hence generalizability of the findings is limited. Further researches can be conducted in this area with larger sample sizes.

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