

## Factors Contributing Low English Language Literacy in Rural Primary Schools of Karachi, Pakistan

Huma Akram<sup>1</sup>, Yingxiu Yang<sup>1</sup>, Naseer Ahmad<sup>2</sup> & Sarfraz Aslam<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Education, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

<sup>3</sup> School of Education, Shaanxi Normal University, China

Correspondence: Huma Akram, School of Education, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China. E-mail: akram\_humal@outlook.com

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### Abstract

Education prepares individuals to contribute constructively in this globalised world. Apart from this, several factors make English learning essential as a part of the educational practice and receive particular importance. Unfortunately, Pakistan is still lagging in achieving English literacy, especially in rural areas. The present study aims to explore the challenges and to suggest solutions to improve English learning and teaching in rural primary schools of Karachi, Pakistan. By employing qualitative design, eighteen teachers (12 females and 6 males) were selected through convenient sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. All the interviews were analysed through thematic analysis technique and the views of teachers were confirmed by observing their classes for two days. The findings reveal that teachers and students encounter several obstacles that hinder them in acquiring effective English learning. These include the weak background of English, lengthy course outline, limited resources, crowded and multilingual classes, shortage of English teachers, lack of parents' interest and inadequate teachers' training. Accordingly, the study mainly suggests that language teachers should be equipped with necessary teaching resources along with continuous specialised training to meet the challenges.

**Keywords:** English literacy, rural primary schools, English learners, teachers' professional development, mother tongue, challenges in teaching English

### 1. Introduction

Education is acknowledged as the backbone of a country as it promotes the efficiency of individuals and generates literate and skilled nation mainly to keep pace with the globalised world of science and technology. Literacy, defined differently by others, is the ability to read, write, understand and communicate in any specific language which everybody agrees (OECD, 2013; UNESCO, 2005). Pakistan Education policy defines literacy as "the ability to read, write and understand a paragraph in any language along with basic numeracy skills" (Pakistan Ministry of Education, 2017).

In contrast with the other languages, English language literacy is viewed more critical as it is recognised as a global language (Dewi, 2014), and extensively spoken around the globe to interrelate with people from diverse cultures, ethnic groups, and social backgrounds. Apart from the communication purpose, English is known for scientific and technological information across the world (Seargeant & Erling, 2011). The rising demand for the English language increases its significance to learn. As reported by Paik (2008), English is viewed as a vital instrument for surviving in the globalised market, which increases the need for learning the English language more. Besides, English is the official language and generally a requirement for many white-collar jobs in Pakistan (Haidar, 2018; Rahman, 2005), as it plays the role of gate-keeping for the majority of the jobs (Coleman, 2010). Similarly, English is also the medium of higher education, which provides help in assessing the local and global resources, leads to self-improvement and career success (Mansoor, 2004; Rahman, 2007; Rassool & Mansoor, 2009).

Thus, a person who does not know English is considered uneducated for not having linguistic capital that is valued in the market (Haidar, 2018; Tamim, 2014). By considering the demand and importance of English

language, it is observed in the Pakistani context that students whose English language skills are excellent can quickly get admissions in renowned educational institutions versus those who lack mastery in English (Zeeshan, 2013).

### *1.1 Background*

Pakistan being multilingual and multiethnic country is the home of diverse languages with currently 65 spoken languages (Rahman, 2005). Urdu is the national language of Pakistan since independence. In contrast, English as an official language enjoys the status of dominance in all the domains of power like administration, judiciary, military, education and media, and thus viewed as a passport for social and economic mobility, privilege and prestige in Pakistan (Coleman & Capstick, 2012; Shamim, 2011). With such a prominent approach and holding position, it is almost impossible to avoid its importance in securing a job both in public or private domains (Channa, 2017).

Pakistan has set a literacy vision, targeting 100% literacy to be achieved by 2030 up to primary and higher levels, respectively (Pakistan Ministry of Education, 2018). However, due to low enrollment, and less survival rate, it could hardly reach to 62% (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2018).

To evaluate the status of literacy, ASER conducts annual surveys in rural and urban primary schools across the country. According to the latest report, English learning at the national level is still deficient among other competencies, i.e., 55%, while the rural areas are still in crises with scarce learning (ASER, 2020). At the provincial level, Sindh province is found at the bottom with only 27% literacy rate (ASER, 2020).

Besides, no study is conducted to find out the causes of low English literacy rate in Sindh, Pakistan. Therefore, this study fills the gap by investigating the factors of low literacy as perceived by primary school teachers led by the following research objectives:

- 1) To investigate the challenges faced by the teachers in achieving English literacy among students of rural primary schools of Karachi.
- 2) To constitute a foundation for upgrading the teaching of English as a second language in primary schools in Pakistan.

## **2. Review of Literature**

The past studies have identified several issues regarding English literacy in Pakistan as well as at the global level. The major challenge is that English is generally introduced as a core subject in primary schools without paying attention to the competencies of teachers. Several studies have identified a severe shortage of qualified and trained teachers (Nawab, 2012; Bashiruddin & Qayyum, 2014; Hu, 2007).

Another reported challenge concerning English language learning is large class size in Pakistan (Khan & Khan, 2016), and globally (Shamim, 2012), finding hard for teachers to apply learner-centred teaching, or execute group tasks (Hoque, 2009). Another issue related to large-sized classes is control and discipline, especially during the speaking activities in the class (Littlewood et al., 2007).

Another common challenge for teachers concerns the availability of resources they require. Unavailability and insufficient funding of teaching resources in rural schools are reported as another obstacle for teachers (Hungu et al., 2017). While the use of multimedia technology, detected as a useful tool for learning English (Yasin et al., 2014), however, teachers have not always been able to access in Pakistani schools (Nawab, 2012).

Another major problem is related to the level of English language of teachers. Low speaking competence and confidence level of teachers have consistently been reported in the studies (Ahn, 2011; Shamim, 2008). Teachers use Urdu or other local languages as a medium of instruction because their own competence in English is poor (Coleman, 2010). Moreover, it is believed by many teachers that teaching in the target language may cause anxiety and raise questions regarding their speaking and listening skills (Kuchah, 2009).

Another major problem is the lack of communication and comprehensions between the students and teachers, especially in the rural areas. Teachers often find themselves incapable of communicating with the students in their mother tongue. This problem is identified by Pal et al. (2016) accordingly, the use of national language for instruction in the classroom is challenging, as most of the students are not proficient in their national language thus difficult for them to learn. The same problem is reported by Akram (2017). Thus, home environment and family background contribute a significant role in the learning and performance of students (Farooq et al., 2011).

Motivating learners is also reported as an issue, particularly in rural areas, as children hardly find the application of English they learn (Kam, 2002). Bilal et al. (2013) suggested that adding creative activities in the syllabus may help learners to motivate for English learning.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Since man is a social animal and cannot live without the influence of the environment; therefore, a person's interaction cannot be separated from his/her environment (Lin, 2012). Similarly, Saracho (1986) determined the relationship between individuals and their cultural backgrounds through her theory. She stated that the language and home culture of several children differ from teachers, books and schools. This difference might provoke young children and let them respond differently:

Level 1. (Lowest level): Students get confused while experiencing very different languages and cultural environment.

Level 2. Students hide their language and customs and pretend that their language and culture is similar to the schools.

Level 3. Students adopt those new customs in the schools, which they perceive the best customs to make them their patterns.

Level 4. (Highest level): Students are capable of switching back from one language and culture to another language and culture.

Thus, the present study adopts Saracho theoretical framework, as it is very relevant to the present study, implies that students from different lingual backgrounds encounter various language difficulties while enter in the School. This study is attempted to understand those challenges that hinder students from learning English and how teachers cope up those challenges.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Study Design

A qualitative design was adopted by using semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) and classroom observations (Appendix B) to acquire a comprehensive data as it deeply reveals the detailed information (Whiting, 2008). Furthermore, the participants were interrogated through follow-up questions during interviews. Since accessing to all rural schools of Karachi was a time-consuming task; therefore, convenient sampling technique was employed for acquiring data, and 18 teachers (12 females and six males) were chosen randomly from different primary schools. The demographic details of the selected school teachers are represented below in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic detail of teachers

Category	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	6	33.3
Female	12	66.6
<b>Age</b>		
21–30	10	55.5
30–40	8	44.4
<b>Education</b>		
Intermediate	1	5.5
Bachelor	10	55.5
Master	7	38.8
<b>Teaching Experience</b>		
1–2 years	5	27.7
2–5 years	13	72.2

The interviews were carried out through direct face-to-face contact with the researcher oneself and audio-taped with the consent of the teachers. Duration of interviews lasted for almost 20–30 minutes, and language was used according to the convenience of participants. Moreover, by using the observation checklist (followed by interviews) class of each participant was observed for two days.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed and then shown to another researcher for double examination. Subsequently, the data was examined through the approach of Miles et al. (2013), and responses of the interviewees were encoded from the initial groups of coding. After putting the finishing touches, all the codes were combined simultaneously and arranged into respected categories resulting into main themes (shown in Table 2, Miles et al.,

2013).

### 3.3 Reliability of the Results

The researcher reviewed the interview data to prevent data misapprehension through member checking (Creswell, 2013). For this purpose, the interview transcriptions were sent back to all participants to get clarified responses. The reliability of the findings was enhanced by sending the coding structure to the second researcher for another coding. As conveying the collected data to two or more researchers enhance the truthfulness and reliability of the results (Miles et al., 2013). For the further authenticity of results, the views of teachers were reaffirmed by conducting observations (Gray, 2009).

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

The researcher has configured all the ethical concerns to ensure the protection of the participants of the study. These concerns include avoiding participants from any kind of harmful effects, keeping their honour and privacy. All the interviews were carried out after taking permission from the interviewees. To keep the information of the interviewees' private, their names were altered with the serial number, e.g., P#01, P#02, P#03, and P#18.

## 4. Results

The challenges encountered by teachers and learners in achieving English literacy are summarised in the following table, incorporated with the frequencies and percentages on the basis of interviewees' responses.

Table 2. Analysis of English learning challenges

S. No.	Themes	Sub-Themes	F	%
1.	Weak English background (WB)	Poor Background of English (WB-PB/EN)	3	16.6
		Weak in reading (WB-WI/RE)	6	33.3
		can't understand English (WB-UN/EN)	8	44.4
2.	Multilingual Background (MC)	Students from diverse language backgrounds (MC-SB/DV)	3	16.6
		Students speak their mother tongue (MC-SP/MT)	7	38.8
		Parents only speak their mother tongue (MC-PS/MT)	6	33.3
3.	Inadequate teachers' training (IT)	inadequate workshops (IT-IN/WO)	6	33.3
		lack of refresher training (IT-RF/TR)	7	38.8
		lack of principal's guidance (IT-LA/PG)	3	16.6
4.	Limited Resources (LR)	Restricted facilities (LR-RS/FC)	5	27.7
		insufficient teaching materials (LR-IN/TM)	4	22.2
		Limited time (ID-LI/TM)	3	16.6
		Unavailability of electricity (ID-LI/PE)	3	16.6
5.	Crowded Classes (CC)	A large number of students (CC-LN/ST)	1	83.3
6.	Lengthy course outline (LC)	The course outline is lengthy (LC-CO/LN)	9	50
		difficult textbook (LC-DF/TX)	5	27.7
7.	Shortage of English teachers (ST)	Lack of consistent teacher (ST-LO/TE)	4	22.2
		empty classrooms (ST-EM/CL)	5	27.7
		multi-grade teaching (ST-MG/TE)	4	22.2
8.	Lack of Parents' Interest (LP)	Low attention of Parents (LP-LA/PA)	4	22.2
		Low motivation in students (LP-LM/ST)	5	27.7
		Parents are not literate (LP-PA/LI)	3	16.6

It is noticed that the weak English background of students is detected as the major challenge, while the lack of parents' interest is found the least one. On comparing all the themes (shown in Figure 1) the value of weak English background attained 94.4%, and lack of parents' interest obtained 66.6%.

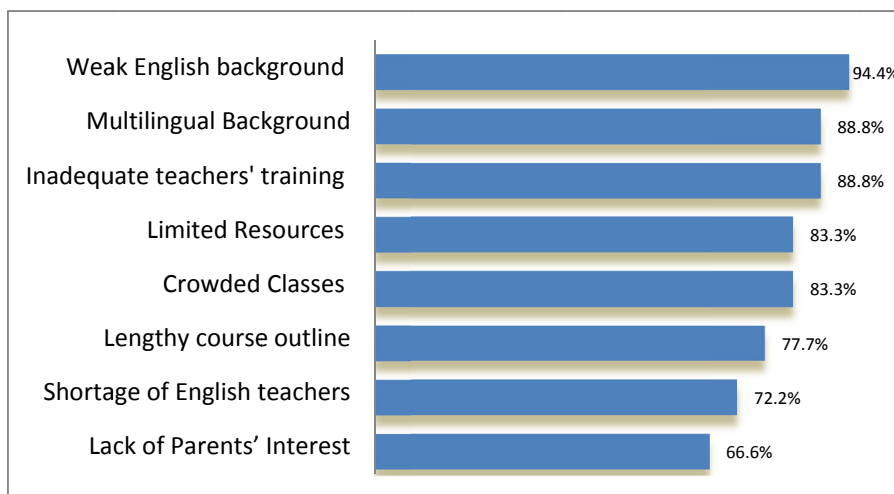


Figure 1. Comparison of challenges in achieving English literacy, in (%)

The emerged themes from the challenges experienced by teachers and learners are further described below:

#### 4.1 Weak English Background

Weak background of English is identified as the most frequent challenge, and reading ability of students is reported low. Since, their exposure to the English language is inadequate in the schools and limited to only one book, i.e., English textbook. Consequently, students are unfamiliar with even general words of English and feel shy in using English words. Furthermore, the environment of their families allows them to speak in their mother tongue only. Due to this reason, their English vocabulary is also limited and unable to understand language while the teacher uses any sentence in English. According to teachers:

P#1: "Students of class five are very weak in English; their reading level is poor, and they are not eligible for this class."

P#3: "Their reading skill is very weak due to which they cannot memorise notes easily."

#### 4.2 Multilingual Classes

Multilingual classrooms refer to the ones where various kinds of native languages are spoken (Malone, 2007). The multilingual classroom is identified as another big challenge for about 92% of teachers. Students mostly use their mother tongue in the class and cannot understand the instructions of teachers delivered in English or Urdu. The situation becomes worse if a teacher cannot communicate or comprehend with students in their mother tongue. In rural areas, generally, everyone uses mother language for communication, and parents also communicate with their children in the mother tongue; hence School is the only place for students to learn English. According to some participants

P#14: "Majority students are Sindhi speakers, but I cannot teach in Sindhi. I use the Urdu language for instructions, and I feel students feel hard to understand the lesson."

P#10: "Students speak different languages in the classroom. They cannot understand properly the instruction given in English or Urdu language."

#### 4.3 Inadequate Teachers' Training

Another challenge identifies that about 90% of the teachers do not get the opportunity to enhance their pedagogical skills arranged by the schools. Therefore, they face several difficulties in teaching and cannot teach effectively. Besides, the principals of some schools do not guide English language teachers properly. Consequently, teachers do not find themselves able to identify their weaknesses. One of the participants said:

P#11: "I am good in English, but my pedagogical skills are not good. If I get training from the School's management, I can teach well, but here no any training or workshop is arranged for teachers".

#### 4.4 Limited Resources

Resources refer to materials or assets provided by the organisation to teach efficiently. Without having proper facilities or resources, it is difficult for students to understand the lessons in a better way. Most of the rural schools are deprived of such kind of facilities such as unavailability of electricity, teaching aids, adequate time,

healthy water and transport. According to one participant:

P#7: "We are not provided with any other teaching resource except textbooks. School should provide at least one multimedia so that children may learn effectively."

Struggling learners require more time to make progress, either individually or in groups. Whereas, they are not provided with extra time and the number of English periods are limited. Consequently, teachers cannot guide enough to fill the gap in learning. P#8 mentioned:

P#8: "The duration of the English period is only 40 minutes daily, that is why it is difficult to clarify in details or repeat the lesson."

#### *4.5 Crowded Classes*

The ideal size of a primary class is confined to 17 students for efficient learning (Tanner, 2009). When the number of students gets exceeded from the suggested limit, then it is said to be the over-crowded class. About 85% of the participants mentioned the problem of a large number of students in their classes, which hinders them from paying attention to each student individually, and classrooms become noisy. According to some participants:

P#13: "The classes possess a large number of students. Due to which, it is difficult for me to focus on each student in the class."

P#10: "Time is wasted to maintain the discipline of the class, due to which I do not get enough time to explain in detail."

#### *4.6 Lengthy Course Outline*

About 80% of teachers identified Lengthy coursework as another challenge, as the English subject is comprised of two or three books that include textbook, a grammar book and storybook. Teachers find themselves incapable of completing the syllabus timely and the difficulty increase when the students are weak in reading and understanding the instructions of the teacher. The teachers are compelled to cover the syllabus within a specified period and thus not able to repeat the syllabus. In such circumstances, the cognitive needs and requirements of the students get neglected. Moreover, according to some participants, the vocabulary used in the textbooks found very difficult, as it does not align with the mental level of the students.

P#4: "The coursework is very lengthy due to which it is not easy to complete it within the given time frame."

P#6: "The lessons includes in their textbooks are very difficult. The students feel very hard to read and understand because of complex vocabulary and lessons."

#### *4.7 Shortage of English Teachers*

About 75% of the participants reported the acute shortage of English teachers. Since the schools are located in rural areas, it is challenging to find any teacher there. Consequently, qualified teachers are hired from the distant urban areas, but because of long-distance and no accommodation, teachers cannot continue their jobs for a long time. Classes remain empty for months, and few teachers run the whole classes by merging students in a single classroom. It is challenging not only for students but also for teachers to teach a large number of students. According to the one participant:

P#15: "There is no English teacher in our School from several months. It is difficult for me to run both units alone. I cannot give attention to all students individually due to a large number of students."

#### *4.8 Lack of Parents' Interest*

Another identified challenge by 73% of teachers is the lack of parents' interest in the studies of their children. It affects severely on the academic performance of their children. One participant expressed as:

P#6: "Students often do not perform their homework, and their parents neglect their studies. Nevertheless, whenever they are called by the teachers to inform their progress, they do not come."

This attitude of parents also declines the interest of students in English learning and is considered as the biggest problem. According to participant:

P#5: "It is tough to teach those students who do not want to learn and show no interest towards teacher's instructions."

#### *4.9 Classroom Observations Remarks*

The researcher personally observed the classrooms of all participants. The observed findings are quite similar, as

described by the selected participants in the interviews.

The students in the classrooms were hardly giving a response which shows that they are not paying attention and unable to comprehend the instructions of the teacher. Only a few students answered the questions of teachers, while few were able to read the lessons entirely. The duration of classes was 35 to 40 minutes as reported by the teachers, which is not sufficient enough to teach properly. There was not any supporting material except blackboard and textbook in the classrooms, which shows that teachers are not being provided with any supporting material.

Regarding the number of students, most of the classrooms were filled with a large number of students and teachers were not able to control the class properly. Quality of instructions given by teachers was not up to the mark.

Regarding language use, the researcher noticed that students were speaking continuously with their classmates in their mother tongue. However, some students were communicating in Urdu language, while other students were not able to understand teacher's instructions properly. In other words, observations confirm the findings got from the interviews.

## 5. Discussion

Conducted interviews and observations have identified various challenges that affect the English literacy of learners of rural primary schools in Karachi. Weak English background of students has found the most challenging issue since their exposure to the English language is very limited. This finding is aligned with the study of Al-sobhi and Preece (2018); accordingly, the lack of exposure to the English language is responsible for sparse learning of English. Al Yaqoobi et al. (2016) also claim that lack of use of English language in homes and community affects the learning level of students negatively.

Regarding local language usage, excessive use of mother tongue in the English classrooms found another obstacle that inhibits students from English learning. This challenge is also identified by Khan and Khan (2016), Worthington et al. (2011), Misbah et al. (2017) which reports that the use of mother tongue in the classrooms affects English learning negatively. Moreover, parents of the learners are from the low socio-economic background, thus unable to pay for extra tuitions. Students, therefore, do not get enough opportunities to learn more. This finding is in line with the study of Butler and Le (2017), where the socio-economic background of parents is identified as the reason for low English learning.

Teachers' training is of great importance as it enhances the academic performance of the students by improving Pedagogical practices (Gore et al., 2017). Lack of proper teachers' training found another obstacle for untrained teachers which affect the learning of students badly. Same challenge has been identified in other studies (Rahman et al., 2019; Hungi, 2017).

Resources refer to the facilities and teaching aids that facilitate the teaching and learning process (Tomlinson, 2012). Limited resources are found another challenge that prevents children from motivating to learn English. Other studies have revealed similar challenges of inadequate facilities as a cause of ineffective teaching and learning English (Songbatumis, 2017; Zein, 2012; Torto, 2017).

Adequate time contributes significantly in the fulfilment of teaching responsibilities efficiently (Rentner et al., 2016). Regarding the duration of teaching, insufficient time is found another factor that inhibits teachers from explaining in details. This finding is congruent with the findings of Songbatumis (2017), where teachers were challenged by inadequate time.

Another factor that hinders the learning of English at primary level is a large number of classes' size, due to which teachers cannot pay attention properly to all students in a limited period. This challenge is also identified by Khouya (2018); accordingly, overcrowded classrooms affect pedagogical duties of teachers negatively and reduce the quality of learning.

Textbooks play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process (Mahmood, 2011). Therefore, writing/selection of textbooks should be made very carefully as textbooks are considered as the core syllabus (Habib, 2017). Lengthy Course outline and difficult textbooks found another challenge that influences the learning of students negatively. This finding is in line with the findings of Putra and Lukmana (2017), which reports that poor understanding of textbooks causes a problem in teaching and learning vocabularies and reading comprehensions.

Furthermore, the shortage of teachers is found as another issue which hinders students' learning of English. The similar issue has been identified in rural schools of other countries, such as in Australia (Weldon, 2015), America

(Hanford, 2017) and New Zealand (Richards et al., 2013).

Parents' involvement is of great importance in students' academic performance (Otani, 2019). Lack of parents' interest is found another problem that slows down the motivation level of students, and they do not take an interest in studies. This finding is congruent with the findings of (Cun, 2019); accordingly, the lack of parents' interest causes negative attitude in learners towards English learning.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of teachers' views and classroom observations, it is reflected that teachers and students of rural primary schools in Karachi encounter numerous challenges in coping the situation of English literacy. The major one is associated with the lingual background of learners which allows them to speak only the mother tongue, and thus their exposure to English is limited to schools only. This problem remains one of the leading barriers for learners and teachers in the classrooms to understand each other. In order to overcome this challenge, teachers should be trained to relate their pedagogy to the social backgrounds of students' communities for practical learning (Ajayi, 2014). Moreover, Remedial classes should be arranged to strengthen the basics of English, while students should be encouraged to use English words in the class and instructions should be given in the local language to develop the understanding (Wilson et al., 2018).

Other considerable challenges are related to inadequate teachers' training programs and limited access to resources. Consequently, teachers are not able to teach effectively. Therefore, it is suggested that schools should provide adequate opportunities for the professional development of teachers. Besides, the required supporting materials should be provided to enable teachers to teach efficiently and boost students' performance (Adamba, 2018). Furthermore, the number of English classes should be increased to enhance the time for learning.

The other encountered challenges include crowded classrooms, lengthy course outline, Shortage of teachers and lack of Parents' Interest. In light of these challenges, the study suggests that the number of students should not be exceeded from 25 in each class, and additional students should be arranged in separate classrooms. Textbooks should be formulated according to the needs and cognitive levels of students so that they may learn quickly. Teachers should be facilitated with hardship area allowance, accommodation and transport facilities to retain in the schools. Parents' awareness meetings should be arranged by schools to encourage them in contributing the English learning of their children. It will help in developing the interest of parents as well as the students in English learning. Due to limited resources, this study was conducted in rural areas of Karachi. In order to investigate further, another study should be conducted at the provincial level.

## 7. Implications

The information drawn from the findings of this study are expected to add knowledge in the existing literature concerning English literacy will be useful for teachers, teacher training institutions, administrators, and curriculum developers as well as policymakers. In light of present challenges, they can plan some strategies to enhance the learning level of the English language. This study is also useful for parents regarding the importance of English literacy to be developed in their children.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

- 1) Introduce yourself briefly.
- 2) What is your educational background?
- 3) Which class do you teach?
- 4) How much experience you have of teaching English?
- 5) Which language do you use while teaching in the class?
- 6) What challenges you have to face as an English language teacher?
- 7) How do you deal with those challenges?
- 8) To What extent students understand the taught lesson?
- 9) How many students can understand the instructions given in English?
- 10) Please recommend the ways you think should be employed to overcome these issues.

## Appendix B

### Observational Checklist

The purpose of the observation is to compare participants' views regarding the challenges faced by them in English classrooms.

#### Section A

Teacher's Name ..... Date .....

Class Observed ..... Time .....

Observer's Name ..... Number of Students .....

#### Section B

- 1) Duration of the class.
- 2) Resources used by the teachers in the classroom.
- 3) Number of students in the class
- 4) The language used by the students for communication in the class.
- 5) Use of English language by the students.
- 6) Use of English language by the teacher.
- 7) Teachers' use of mother-tongue in the classroom.
- 8) The reaction of the students if the instructions are given in English language only.
- 9) Language of instruction used by the teacher.
- 10) Level of English reading of the students.

Comments:

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