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Analyzing English Language Learning Problems of Students through the Lenses of Action Research

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Abstract: *Traditional mode of teaching promoted rote learning among learners over the years. A University classroom is a place where learners acquire new knowledge, skills, abilities, capabilities, and techniques. This study unveils the English Language Learning problems of undergraduate students. The target population was 155 university students. Qualitative research methods were fielded. 'Observation, video-recording, focus group interview, and diary notes' were research instruments. Outcomes were drawn through the lenses of Action Research. Purposive sampling was the research design. 'Interpretive approach' was employed for data analysis. Results exhibited that students confronted English language problems, and they affected student learning. The study speaks volumes about the gap between teaching and learning. This gap needs to be addressed through Action Research to achieve effective learning outcomes. This study recommends the use of novel teaching strategies, lesson plans, pair work, group discussions, robust material, learner engagement, and constructive feedback in university education.*

Key Words: Action Research, Teaching Strategies, Learning Problems, English Language Learners

Introduction

Effective learning requires a robust mechanism of teaching, which is missing in our education system. It is an established fact in the academic arena that trained faculty imparts quality education and knowledge to students. A trained teacher enhances classroom learning outcomes by engaging novel plans and strategies that provide a rich learning podium to students. Teaching practices and classroom courses affect student learning outcomes (Kim et al., 2019). It is a classroom that makes or mars academic improvement of students. Literature review studies show concern about student classroom learning problems. The public sector institutions of Pakistan should move forward in the field of teaching. They should introduce new tools and techniques to produce well-rounded graduates who can contribute at academic and administrative fronts following studies. More specifically, they should add new strategies in teaching and learning

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to prepare budding students as better human capital for the country. Teachers hardly introduce innovative task-based activities in teaching, but they prefer to follow outdated teaching techniques. It is a need of time that English Language Teachers make their teaching communicative based. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a way forward to understand to teach English as a second language. It helps to comprehend learner problems in erratic educational contexts. The Communicative Language Teaching approach encourages teachers and students to seek teaching and learning materials from living societies and environments (Dos Santos, 2020). By adopting lively practices, students' lives can be significantly changed. It has been observed that English language teachers of Pakistan follow the traditional method of teaching. The world has global; thus, it demands from us to act as per the needs of the digital world. Teachers hesitate engaging students in communicative tasks, i.e., oral presentations, debates, discussions, peer and teacher interactions. Learning has completely changed in the modern era, and it has become interactive and collaborative based where learner-centeredness is encouraged. The present study endeavors to understand the English language learning problems of learners with a special focus on the context of Pakistan. It uses the lenses of the Action Research approach. It explores dimensions of how to make teaching and learning interesting and effective for students. This study is significant because it focuses the teaching and learning process on making it outcome-based for students. By improving the quality of education, teaching, and learning, effective results can be obtained. Hence, following graduation, passing out students shall be capable of getting a good platform performing multiple job tasks. This study will have a significant impact upon English language learners (ELLs), because it would help them to understand English language learning problems and overcome them during the study.

Study Rationale

The rationale of this study was to find out the English language learning problems of students. It further aims to explore the ways and means through which English language learning problems of QUEST students could be overcome. The understanding of English language learning problems of students has been remotely found in the existing body of literature. A little research has been conducted on this subject in the context of Pakistan so far. Hence, this study looks forwards to exploring the English language learning problems of students of Pakistan. It addresses the following research questions:

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the English language learning problems of students of Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Science & Technology?

RQ 2: How far English language learning outcomes of students of Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Science & Technology be enhanced?

Literature Review

The English language plays an indispensable role in this contemporary age of globalization and industrialization. It opens gateways of golden opportunities obtaining well-paid jobs in the national and international corporate sector (Laghari et al., 2021). Language proficiency means to master macro skills of the English language, which are vital for communication purposes. Communication has four communication skills, i.e., listening, reading, speaking and writing. The first two skills are called 'receptive', and the rest two are 'productive' skills. English has got much popularity in Pakistan and is considered like a new currency note which attracts people. English is a 'lingua-franca' because it is widely spoken by a larger community of the world, ranging from different regions, cultures, and countries. English enjoys the official status of Pakistan, and official correspondence is made through this mode of language. Simply put, it is the language of the public and private offices of Pakistan. English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools, colleges, and universities of Pakistan. English is used as a communication doorway for the students of Pakistan who wish to pursue higher

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studies in foreign countries. Unfortunately, effective English language teaching go unnoticed in academic institutions of Pakistan, and still, it is a far cry for students. English is taught as a compulsory subject, but teaching methodologies do not fulfill student academic needs (Akram & Mahmood, 2007). There is a lack of academic institutions in Pakistan that properly promote the English language learning skills of students. Resultantly, students of Pakistan face multiple English language problems on academic and professional fronts. There is a growing need to inculcate new methods, tools, techniques, and technology teaching the English language to students. The government of Pakistan has announced English as an entryway towards success and has declared it as a medium of instruction (Government of Pakistan, 2009) in institutions. Akram et al. (2007) stated that an outdated 'grammar-translation method' is used teaching English, which does not cater academic needs of students. Younas et al. (2020) established the idea that outdated books, imitation, poor creativity, rote learning system, and poor resources augment student learning problems.

Akram et al. (2013) studied speaking English problems of post-graduate students and found that lack of confidence and speaking anxiety were factors that hit students' proficiency. Akasha (2015) studied Arabic-speaking ESL students in the USA and found that teachers complained that due to vocabulary, students faced problems for speaking English in English language classes. Kannan (2009) explored the learning difficulties of students in the English language and held that lack of proper speaking skill improvement in bilingual teaching methodology was the reason. Ali Nawab (2015) noted that speaking skill is a neglected area in classrooms because teachers scarcely design activities where students are provided opportunities for exposing themselves. Tahir Khan et al., (2016) stated that most of the students showed the desire to excel in English language skills, but many factors hindered their performance. Haberman et al., (2020) described the need for English-speaking speakers in ESL teaching as more efficient as compared to non-native English-speaking speakers and concluded that they acquire more correctness in teaching. Tufail et al. (2015) defined main reason behind students' falling short in speaking skills due to faulty examination system. Because students focus on passing examinations ignoring to attain linguistic ability. Akasha (2013) study established that the syllabus was poorly designed to meet the academic needs of students and poor practical activities were encompassed, which reduce students' anxiety. Aziz et al., (2014) say that the syllabus taught in Pakistan focuses on examination; therefore, students are interested in passing examinations attaining better grades. Akram et al., (2007) described that the syllabus in Pakistan fail to help students from actual learning because the outdated 'grammar-translation method' dominates the examination system, and it mars students' creativity and critical approach. A trained teacher determines students' learning, and to be a skilled teacher in the English language, wide-ranging knowledge requires helping students to get lifelong learning objectives (Deocampo, 2020). If learners English learning problems are reduced, their academic learning would be satisfactory and objective oriented. Raja & Selvi (2011) state numerous issues affect the process of learning a second language. English language teachers should acquire appropriate training to deliver academic lectures in ESL classrooms efficiently. Laghari et al. (2021) study substantiate the problems of English language learners and provide arduous solutions to overcome English language problems to promote effective learning. In this dimension, English language teachers, academicians, and academic directors should help students to overcome English language learning barriers that affect their academic performance.

Research Method

Qualitative methods were used in terms of 'observation, video-recording, focus group interview, and diary notes. One hundred fifty-five (155) first-year students enrolled in BS English language and literature and B.E Electrical and civil engineering students participated in this study. Purposive sampling was the research design of the study. The Action Research approach was employed to draw study outcomes.

Data Collection

Data were collected in two (2) phases. 'Reconnaissance and intervention' methods are produced as under for easy understanding of research process:

Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance is the first phase of data collection. In this phase, researchers tried to know learners' problems through observation, focus group interviews, and field notes. Reconnaissance follows intervention which is data collection second phase.

Table 1. Schedule of Reconnaissance

S. No	Teacher	Duration	Tools	Problems Explored
1	Teacher A	60 Minutes	Video-recording	Lack of lesson planning
2	Teacher A	60 Minutes	Note-taking	Lack of pair and group activities
3	Teacher B	60 Minutes	Video-recording	Teacher dominance
4	Teacher B	60 Minutes	Note-taking	Non-authentic material
5	Teacher C	60 Minutes	Video-recording	Traditional teaching
6	Teacher C	60 Minutes	Note-taking	The static position of the teacher

Intervention

Researchers designed various lessons to implement them in intervention to explore problematic areas in teaching. Lesson plans contained specific task objectives. Tasks were performed within the set time frame.

Table 2. Schedule of Action Plan

S. No	Duration	Focus of Area	Tools	Objectives
1	60 Minutes	Lesson planning	Note-taking	To design well-planned lessons
2	60 Minutes	Pair discussions	Note-taking	To initiate pair discussions
3	60 Minutes	Group discussions	Note-taking	To form groups
4	60 Minutes	Monitoring	Note-taking	To monitor the learners' activities
5	60 Minutes	Material Development	Note-taking	To develop the authentic material
6	60 Minutes	Feedback	Note-taking	To give feedback to the learners

Table 3. Schedule of Focus Group Interviews

S. No	Focus group	Discipline	Duration
1	Group one	Electrical Engineering Department	07:23 Minutes
2	Group two	Mechanical Department	06:15 Minutes
3	Group three	English Department	05:41 Minutes

Data Analysis

'Interpretive approach' was used for data analysis. It helped to understand, explain and interpret the discussion. Data were analyzed at the end of each research cycle. Focus group interview data was transcribed.

Informed Consent

In order to maintain ethical consideration for the research, researchers sought ethical consent from participants of the study, such as teachers and students. Respondents' verbatims were video and audio-recorded. Additionally, permission was sought from chairmen of the departments where participants were observed and studied. Students and teachers were assured that gathered data should be used for academic research purposes only.

Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance was based on teachers' reflections. Observations and reflections' purpose was to gain

an in-depth understanding of respondents' views and opinions on the topic of research. The detailed description is produced as under:

Observation 1 [Teacher 1]

Teacher 1, upon entering in the class, greeted students. He started class proceedings with the words: '*In today's class, we will talk about precis writing.'* The teacher first enquired about the meaning of the word 'precis'. After getting student responses, he read some precis writing definitions mentioning various sources of definitions. Afterward, he queried from students about the difference between 'precis' and 'comprehension'. After getting students' responses, teachers continued asking other questions, for instance, the meaning of the word 'compression'. The teacher's major focus persisted on the theoretical part of the topic. For teaching precise, the teacher had brought a page written certain points. It was a teacher talk-dominated class where students were not provided an opportunity of expressing their views. Additionally, students were never provided any academic material on-topic discussion. The teacher adopted the traditional mode of teaching, for example, reading the text from handouts and explaining it. At a certain point, the teacher gave a detailed explanation and discussion that was irrelevant to precis writing. During the lecture, the teacher asked students about any difficulty or confusion. It was observed that some students joined the class late. Then, the teacher questioned them about the reason for the late coming. Upon this, a student gave justification for late coming. The teacher continued the lecture on the topic under study. Later, the teacher asked a student to read the first sentence of the passage given in the handout. Then teacher read the text himself and interpreted it in his own words. Till the end of the lecture, the teacher dominated the class through his talk by reading passages and explaining to them to, and no other activities were practiced in the class. The teacher ended the lecture with the note that maybe his lecture would continue on the same topic.

Observation 2 [Teacher 2]

This teacher taught students how to find out the title of 'precis'. The teacher had provided precis passages to students through a class representative. Precis material was sent through email. Unfortunately, the class representative (CR) could not get reading passage copies. Upon unavailability of reading material, the teacher gave students a topic to search out on their mobile phones for reading purposes. After a few minutes, students located the reading passage and started reading it. Teacher-directed students for reading passages and find out the title. Students were provided ten (10) minutes to complete the task and locate a precise title. Then, the teacher started reading the passage himself and explained it sentence by sentence. Late-comers occupied backbenches in the class. They did never know what to do with the passages. Even the teacher did not tell them to participate in the task. The teacher positioned himself at one place in the class. He neither moved towards students nor involved latecomers in the discussion. The teacher repeated the same practice of reading the text and explaining it in his own words. During the whole class, the backbenchers did not ask any questions from the teacher. The teacher used Urdu and English language for instructions. However, the teacher often used the Urdu language so that students could understand it easily. Around after twenty-five minutes, the teacher told a student to read the passage loudly and said to inform what all about the passage it. Further, he told students to offer their arguments to defend their answers. Then, he asked students about the meaning of the last sentence and what does it mean for them?' In this way, the teacher asked questions from a few students about the last sentence. Then, again he continued the lecture on precis writing. At the end of the lecture, the teacher queried students about any question; thus, the class ended on this discussion.

Observation 3 [Teacher 3]

This teacher started class with his talk, and his talk dominated the class. He continuously talked about 40 minutes out of the 60-minute lecture. The teacher did not bring any teaching material or handouts. He preferred old fashioned mode of lecturing. All students remained passive and silent

during the lecture. Not a single student asked any question. Thus, there was no engagement or participation of students during the whole class. The teacher did not introduce any classroom activity for students, whereas; all the time, he spoke. He left class ten minutes before the scheduled time.

Students' Responses

Since there was no classroom activity or task-based learning thus; students were dissatisfied. Focus group interviews exposed students who wanted that teachers engage them in speaking and writing tasks. They recorded their views as:

Focus Group Interview Excerpt 1

S4: "Our English course is basically we are learning English from initial classes. Therefore, I think according to my opinion in university-level the English course grammar is not necessary…my trust is that…we have to learn in university-level English like that…level. Our course is going very well".

S5: "Our English course is going well. But I think we should talk more in the English language to learn the language… I mean, we need not look at it, we need not read it nor do we need to read it; rather, we need to speak it".

Focus Group Interview Excerpt 2

S3: "He teaches us English in a very good way, but sometimes it is necessary for us to give us. It is necessary for us; the teacher should give us the opportunity to talk in English class.

S4: "Our teacher teaches us very well and…we think he should involve totally, but he does not involve us because he is new".

Focus Group Interview Excerpt 3

S4: "Actually, I feel very hesitant to speak English…and I didn't feel comfortable. So, I think we should talk more in English. That's the problem".

S1: "I think sir gives a chance to students to come, and I think he should arrange one speaking class at least a week at least in two weeks for the betterment of English speaking".

Students seemed satisfied with the English class. However, they yearned for practice-based classes. They held the view that they do not avail speaking opportunities. In reconnaissance, researchers designed an action plan to improve their English language learning skills. This section deals with 'intervention' via Action Plan.

The Intervention

Researchers implemented an 'Action Plan' in the intervention part to augment English language learning outcomes. It is comprised of five cycles. Each section reflection is given produced as under:

Cycle 1: It was based on designing well-planned lessons. The lesson plan is a road map for teachers to identify students learning needs and implement them in class efficiently (Milkova, 2012). A lesson plan allows teachers to find various aspects of pedagogical knowledge (Shen et al., 2007). Lessons designed for this study contained activities, specific objectives, and teaching strategies. First, learners' responses were not positive because they faced problems. Hence, lesson plans were modified, which left a positive impact on students' learning outcomes. The success in intervention depends on an effective lesson plan (Laghari et al., 2021).

Cycle 2: It contained pair work. Classroom improvement is questionable if there is no addition of pair or group work (Otienoh, 2015). Observing the significance of pair work, researchers engaged students in the second research cycle. Hence, the range of this activity from pair to group was enhanced where learners put their learning efforts. As a result, this cycle led towards the satisfaction of learners.

Cycle 3: It included monitoring. This was useful because researchers were able to watch students' performance in engagement with

assigned tasks. Here, students showed keen interest in these tasks since they were well-informed that their involvement in the task was critically and minutely monitored.

Cycle 4: It was based on developing authentic learning material. Development of material is highly important. Laghari et al., (2021) state that rich material supports learners to obtain considerable information that arouses learner interest in further learning. Material development played a paramount role in promoting learners' critical thinking subject interest.

Cycle 5: It was based on providing positive feedback to students. In observatory classes, students were not provided feedback that may encourage them to perform more work. In the academic process, feedback plays a pivotal role because it significantly advances students' and teachers' performance. Klimova (2015) described that students' performance could be reasonably improved through feedback because it shapes students' added performance. The following section deals with the findings of the study.

Findings

This study aimed to understand the English language learning (ELLs) problems of university students. The Action Research approach was used to achieve the objective. Action Research (AR) enabled us to gain an understanding of students' English language learning problems in the reconnaissance. Findings in the intervention section exhibited that every lesson should be planned with certain specific objectives. Second, innovative strategies should be introduced, and students should be provided good opportunities to interact with one each and the teacher during class proceedings. Third, authentic and robust academic material be designed to develop students' critical thinking skills, ability, and capability. Fourth, pairs and group work should be added in teaching in order to encourage students' participation. It shall minimize hesitation and fear factor among students. Also, positive feedback provided an idea that it raises students' morale and encourages them to participate in classroom academic tasks and activities actively. The cyclic procedure of 'Act, Plan, Observe and Reflect' led to promising results. Therefore, through the steps of Action Research, researchers were capable of increasing students' learning successfully and productively.

Discussion and Conclusion

Study findings conclude that university students encounter numerous problems in learning the English language. In this dimension, effective teaching strategies need to be planned by teachers to maximize students' English language learning problems in the modern age of computer technology. A learner-centered teaching approach should be adopted, and classroom new and novel classroom activities should be introduced so that students can overcome their fear and hesitation. Students face problems due to teachers' dominant role in the class. The stages of Action Research, such as 'Act, plan, observe and reflect lead to promising and productive results. Thus, Action Research is problem-solving research that solves student problems in a befitting manner.

In the 'reconnaissance' and 'intervention' phase, this study was successful bringing better learning outcomes on the part of students. The problems faced by students were resolved using the Action Research approach. Implemented Action Plan helped to decrease English language learners learning problems. Also, this study brought sound insights that helped learners improve their English language proficiency. Hence, this study helped to design novel lesson plans which were modified after subsequent lessons. Henceforth, this study led to the professional development of teachers and students in the field of teaching and learning.

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