

Challenges Faced by English Language Teachers at Primary Level in Public Sector Schools: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study was aimed at the investigation of issues faced by the teachers in ELT classes. Primary objective of the study was to bring in light the challenges faced by English language teachers in government primary schools of Abbottabad. Other objectives included the highlighting deficiencies in teachers' professional training, classroom environment and similar other issues adversely affecting the performance of English language teachers in the classrooms. Another important objective was to highlight issue related with students and their parents which ultimately become challenge for the teachers in classrooms. The study was delimited to only English language teachers who teach the subject of English to 5th class in government primary schools of Abbottabad. In its nature, it was a survey based descriptive and exploratory research. Sampling technique adopted in the study was purposive in the selection of circles and random sampling in the selection of respondent teachers. Instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire prepared under the supervision of the experts. Data calculated was analysed and provided in figures for presentation. A number of interesting findings came forth in the study which led to the conclusion that challenges faced by English language teachers in the classroom are multi-dimensional depending upon a number personality, family, school management and community related variables. The researcher suggested a multi-faceted and multi-level strategies to cope with these challenges adopting an integrated approach inclusive of teachers, parent, school administration, district administration and the target community.

Keywords: *Case study, Educational policy, English teacher education, Language learners, School/teacher effectiveness.*

Introduction

Like many other developing countries, English has always dominated the educational policies of Pakistan as a language for development (Shamim, 2011) and the country has gone through a series of policy changes to make English as the sole medium of instruction in all Pakistani schools (Shamim, 2008). The target has still not been achieved in the public sector schools of Pakistan which are mostly referred to as “government Urdu medium schools” on many forums. However, these public sector schools form the majority of prevailing four categories of schools in the country which are private elite English medium schools, private non-elite ‘English medium’ schools, government Urdu medium schools, and dini madaris (Coleman, 2010).

Although, the medium of instruction controversy is very old in Pakistan (Rahman, 1997), yet the government has managed to introduce English language at primary levels in the country (Manan, David, & Dumanig, 2016). Schools functioning in the private sector are thought to be achieving the objectives of making English language as basic medium of instructions to some extent but schools in the public sector are still lacking behind in this particular aspect.

Teachers who teach English language in public sector schools are facing many challenges, which have rarely been documented in the context of Pakistan. Although, the inspectors visiting these schools periodically are aware of a limited number of these problems, yet most of the challenges remain hidden. Curriculum designers at national level are usually not in the direct contact with the end users and the need analysis of students at school as well as classroom level is often not done (Triastuti & Riazi, 2018). This may be the main reason behind the level of difficulty of the contents of the English language textbooks being taught in government primary schools of the country.

Teachers who are teaching English language at primary level in public sector primary schools are trained in general teaching methodologies, to some extent, they are trained in child psychology and evaluation techniques, but they are not trained in how to teach language. Teachers seldom know about the contents of the textbooks aimed at developing the language skills in young students. During their professional training, they are not acquainted with the objectives of the textbook which they would be going to teach after they completion of their training (Spratt, 2015).

People differ from each other in what they know and understand (Harris, 2017). Psychology of each child is different from the other and each individual requires different level of attention during classroom teaching. Teachers who follow discordant methods in the English language class, they do not focus the psychological needs of individual children in the classroom. Many challenges faced by the teachers in language class are due to a wider inter-personal gap between the teacher and the students.

One of the barriers in effective language teaching is the huge teaching load of teachers who are usually teaching more than one subject to more than one classes simultaneously in a single classroom. Though, the matter is related to policy framework at national and provincial level, but it has a direct impact on students' learning abilities, teachers own concentration towards the contents of the subject being taught and the physical health of the both. Excessive teaching load along with multi-teaching tasks is a very common practice in public sector primary schools in the context of Pakistan directly adding to the challenges faced by language teachers at this level. The need is to bring forward and address the challenges faced by English language teachers at primary level in the public sector schools so that the monetary, technological and human resources invested in the education sector become fruitful as well as impact bearing. Without addressing these challenges in a prompt manner, the dream of making English language the only medium of instruction is just a dream.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the present study was to investigate into the challenges of English language teachers of public sector primary schools. The study focused on grade-V English language teachers and documented challenges related to language teaching.

Objective of the Study

Primary objective of the study was to bring in light the challenges faced by teachers in the English language class in government primary schools of Abbottabad. Other objectives included:

1. To highlight deficiencies in teachers' professional training, classroom environment and similar relevant issues affecting the performance of English language teachers adversely.
2. To bring forth issue pertinent to students and their parents which ultimately become challenge for teachers in the classroom.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the deficiencies in teachers' professional training, classroom environment and similar relevant issues affecting the performance of English language teachers adversely?
2. How do issues pertinent to students and their parents if not addressed become challenge for teachers in the classroom?

Literature Review

Among many challenges faced by the teachers teaching English at elementary and primary level is the selection of appropriate methodology. Many scholars (Awan & Nawaz, 2015) hold that Direct method has many benefits on the traditional Grammar Translation Method of teaching English. But the dilemma is that a significant number of existing primary

teachers are not acquainted with all in-practice methods of teaching ELT. Irrespective of their educational background, teachers in the public sector schools are not sufficiently skillful in speaking English (Sarwar, Alam, Hussain, Shah, & Jabeen, 2014), which makes them deficient in active communication with the young students in the classroom. However, according to Sarwar et al. (2014), recent efforts in the teacher training programs are bringing some glimpses of hope in the near future. Researchers like Hargreaves, Mahgoub, and Elhawary (2016) have proved that classroom environment does affect students' ability to learn English on one hand and on the other hand may encourage or discourage the teacher to teach in an effective manner.

Children's motivation in learning English also plays an important role in the EFL classroom. Among many other factors, the parental factor constitutes the main pillar of children motivation in the English language classroom. The socio-economic status (SES) of the parents has varied yet apparent impact on students' level of motivation (Butler, 2015b). The challenge for the teacher is to collaborate with the parents of the young learners as well to achieve the targets of teaching ELT in effective mode.

The Subject Area and the Content

In the history of Pakistan, teaching of English as a subject and language, though gained an elite position in the ruling class as well as the general public, but it used to start at fifth and sixth grade in the public sector schools. Method of teaching used in these schools was predominantly imitation and memorization of the contents (Channa, 2017). So, people educated in the public sector schools lacked in the language expertise. However, those who studied in English medium and elite English medium schools had more command on the language. Unfortunately, people educated in elite English medium schools do not like to serve in government sector primary schools which never reduces the class difference on the

one hand, and on the other hand, children coming from the ordinary social groups of the country cannot be benefitted from the language expertise of these graduates.

The Teachers' Educational Level and Training

Basic qualification of a person for being eligible for teaching in public sector primary schools has been matric which is currently upgraded to intermediate. Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC) is a one-year course which makes a person eligible to teach grade the students of I – V. The lower standard of teachers' basic education and a very limited training period is the real cause of static indicators of development in the country since decades (Farah, Fauzee, & Daud, 2016). Researchers have found that even during the teachers' training sessions, trainers do not follow the international standards of teachers' training. Didactical approach is not adopted; neither on the part of the trainers nor on the end of the student teachers (Shahzad, Tondeur, Zulfqar, & Valcke, 2015).

The Background of the Students

Students' family background has a great link with their performance in the classroom. Family background may be comprised of several variables but noteworthy of these include family education, family income, parents' criminal activity, and family structure. These variables have direct impact on students' achievement in the classroom and other relevant activities (Egalite, 2016). When parents are more concerned about their kids' educational grooming, they hold frequent meetings with their teachers to keep themselves updated with the current status of their kids' academic conditions.

Teachers' Personality

Teachers with dynamic personality are more confident in coping with complex situations. Teacher-student personality similarity directly affects teachers' judgement of students' work (Rausch, Karing, Dörfler, & Artelt, 2016). Teachers who have open-to-all personality mingle with the parents, community and other fellow teachers very quickly

without any hesitation. These types of teachers openly discuss their classroom-related issues with their fellows to discover prompt solutions which can be quickly implemented. The concept of classroom facility sharing is varying from teacher to teacher depending upon their personality traits. Similarly, teachers' personal brought-up, education, professional training, participation in the refresher courses, discussion with fellow teachers, and continuous guidance from the higher ups directly affect students' academic and language achievements. Therefore, teachers' psychological characteristics are directly associated with students' achievement (Klassen & Tze, 2014).

Role of the Teacher

Subject teachers have the immediate and most frequent contact with the learners and they are the managers of the classroom environment having an appreciable influence on the students as well. By following a few good steps, most of the teaching-related challenges can be managed at classroom level. Teachers should also bear in mind that there is no substitute of the hard work. This should also be taught to the language students that if they work hard consistently, they would definitely be reaping the fruit in the form of continuous success. Sharing reduces the intensity of the situation, therefore, teachers should share their problems with colleagues, school management, parents and elders of the community who hold influential positions in the society. This will lead towards reduction of stresses on the one hand, and on the other hand, this strategy will lead towards sustainable as well as adoptable indigenous solutions to the problems.

Role of School Administration

School administration and the district level administration also have important roles to play in coping with the challenges faced by the English language teachers. These administrations fall in the category of monitoring and evaluation authority in the local context. The vigilant these authorities are, the efficient will be teacher in the classroom. However, vigilance does not

mean anti-teacher strategies in any case (MacBeath, Dempster, Frost, Johnson, & Swaffield, 2018). By arranging frequent group meetings of the subject teachers, the district level administration can play its role in increasing inter-teacher relationship. English language teachers can share and discuss their classroom problems with teachers of the same subject working in other schools and come with more practical solutions.

Role of the Community

Teachers' respect on the part of the students and their parents plays very important role in enhancing their efficiency in the classroom. Language teachers are most of the time facing challenges of implant the vocabulary of a fairly new language to students in the brains of young learners using every possible method which could be proved efficient. Teachers' innovative approaches in the classroom should be appreciated by the parents and the community along with the school administration. Teachers assign home tasks to their students for the practice of the language skills learnt in the classroom. With the cooperation of the elders of the community, students' informal practice session can become more fruit-bearing and students' hesitation in speaking the English language reduces a lot. Interactive sessions of the teachers and the community help in reduction of the intensity of various challenges.

Research Methodology

The research is quantitative in nature and utilizes questionnaire as a data collection tool. Questions leading to expectedly similar responses were grouped up, filtered and rephrased to avoid repetition and to reduce the unnecessary length of the questionnaire. The tool was pilot tested on ten respondents, results were analyzed, and the questionnaire was finalized.

It was a descriptive study based on a survey of selected teachers who teach the subject of English in the public sector schools of Abbottabad. Similarly, the research was also an

exploratory study in the manner that it was an attempt to open new aspects for prospective researchers in the same domain. All primary level teachers who teach the subject of English language in public sector schools formulated the population of this study. Data about all the primary teachers in public sector schools was acquired from the offices of the District Education Officers (male and female). All primary schools in the Abbottabad District were divided into ten circles which were being monitored by respective Assistant Sub Divisional Education Officers, who maintained the records of these teachers in their respective Training Resource Centres. Lists of teachers working in the selected circles were acquired from the respective desk in the offices of the District Education Officer (male and female) Abbottabad. The procedure of sampling was comprised of two steps: The first phase of the sampling was partially purposive (Tongco, 2007) in a way that some circles were selected from the urban areas of the District whereas the other circles in the same number were selected from the rural and remote areas of Abbottabad District. Whereas the second phase was a systematic random sampling technique (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1993; Kothari, 2004) in which individual school teachers were selected randomly from the selected circles. The data obtained from the research tool was organized and percentages for each response were calculated. The data was then tabulated in such a manner that responses of male and female respondents were reflected separately with an addition of combined responses as well. The tabulated data was interpreted under the supervision of research advisor and field experts, and, results were carefully derived.

Data Analysis

The data collected through research tool was tabulated and was presented in this chapter. At the end of this chapter, a discussion on the summary of findings has been presented which relates the findings of this particular research with previous similar studies. Fig. 1 shows the responses of teachers to the question whether the English textbooks are difficult to

understand and teach. A clear majority of respondents i.e. 39% were of the opinion that the textbook was difficult. Almost 46% of the female respondents agreed with the statement that the textbook was difficult whereas the male respondents held a quite different opinion about this. Only 32.69% of the male respondents thought that textbook was difficult, 36.54% of them thought it was not difficult and a huge number i.e. 21.15% strongly disagreed.

Figure 1

Responses to the question about difficulty of English textbooks

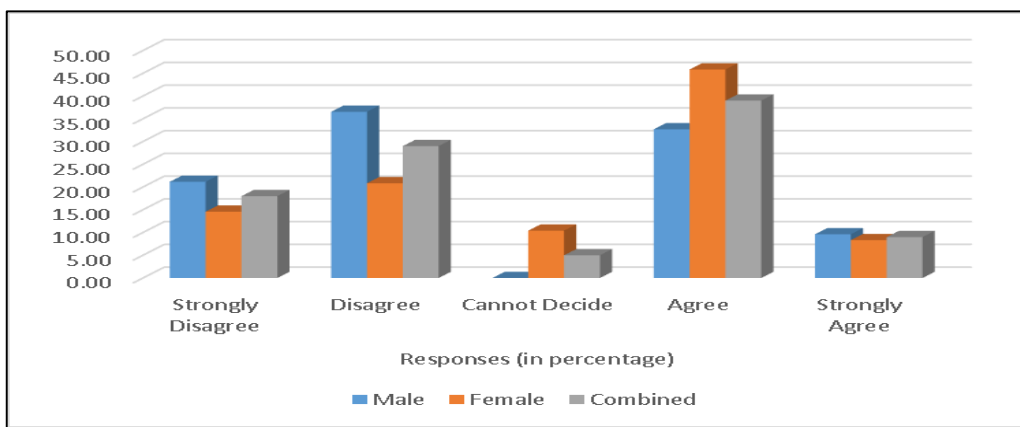


Figure 2

Responses to the question whether the textbook is boring for students

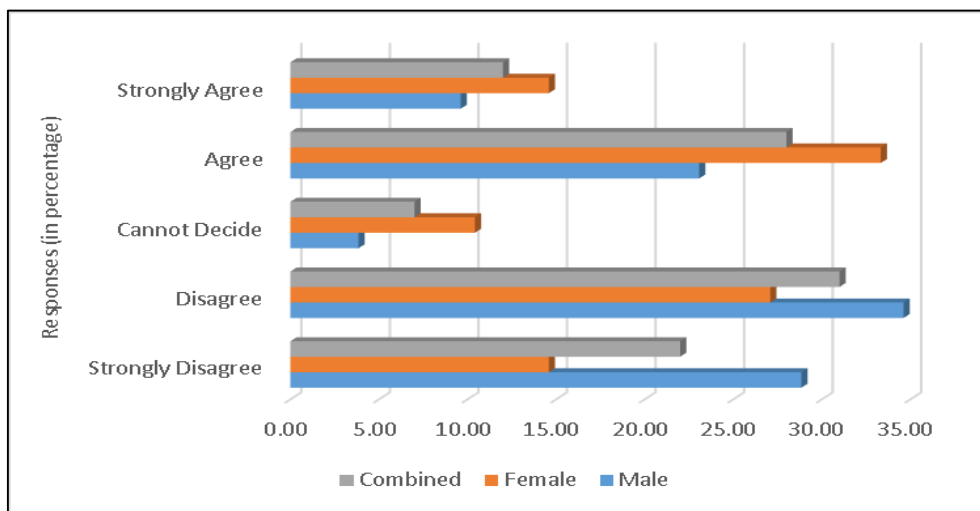


Figure 2 reveals that an obvious majority of the respondents feel that English textbook is not boring. Although majority of the female teachers feel the textbook boring for the students, yet the overall weightage goes to those who disagree with them. Similarly, the

number of female teachers is greater than those of male teachers who could not decide whether the textbook is boring or not. 28.85% of the male respondents very strongly believed that the textbook was not boring. In case of female teachers, the number of extreme opinions on the statement was quite equal i.e. 14.58% of the respondents strongly agreed and strongly disagreed with the statement whether the textbook was boring for the students or not.

Figure 3

Responses to the question if all primary teachers are qualified in the English language

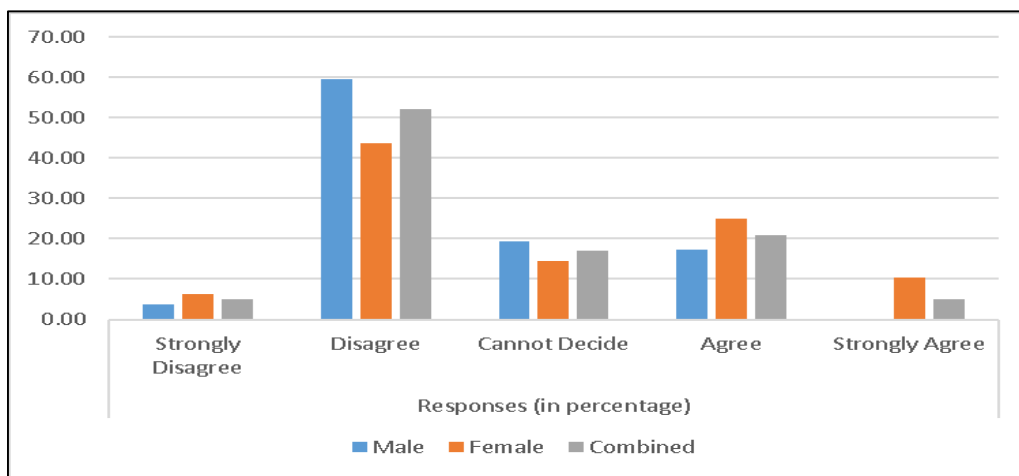


Fig. 3 reveals that majority of the respondents were of the opinion that English language teachers are not properly qualified in teaching the language.

Figure 4

Training of primary teachers in English language

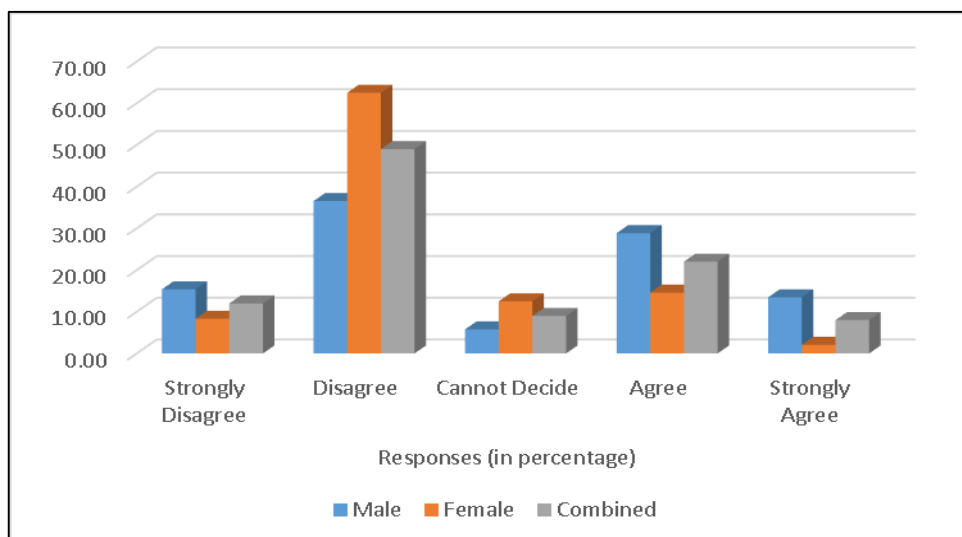


Figure 4 shows a very clear difference between the number of respondents who agree and disagree with the statement that teachers are trained in ELT, the latter having greater value. Values in percentage for the male and female respondents opting for the negation of the existing training are 36.54% and 62.50% respectively.

Figure 5

Inclusion of Montessori teaching in PTC training

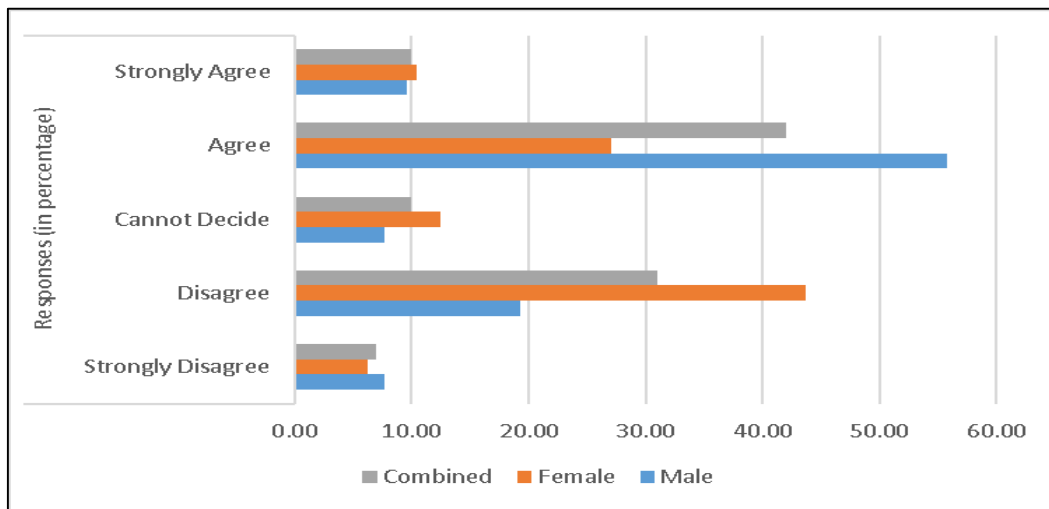
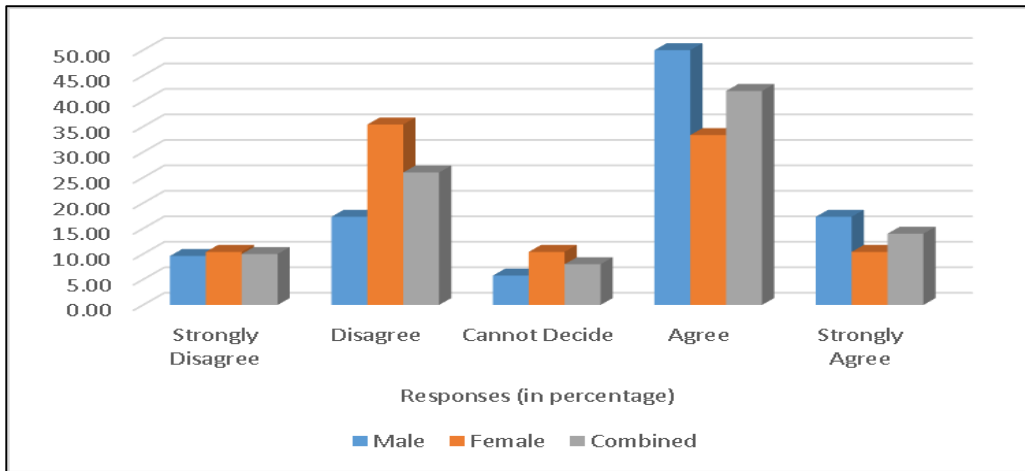


Fig. 5 above shows, 55.77% of the male respondents hold that teachers are properly taught Montessori during their PTC training. On the other hand, 43.75% of the female respondents do not agree with them whereas an overall percentage of 42% respondents including both male and female fall in the column supporting the stance that Montessori is properly taught in PTC training of the primary teachers. Those who support that Montessori is not properly taught during training are 31% and those who could not decide are 10%. Table also shows that male teachers are clearer in making their decision about the matter as only 19.23% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that Montessori is properly taught during professional training and only 7.69% could not make any decision. On the other hand, 12.50% of female teachers could not decide what to say about the content of the PTC training and other 27.08% were of the opinion that Montessori is properly taught during PTC training.

Figure 6

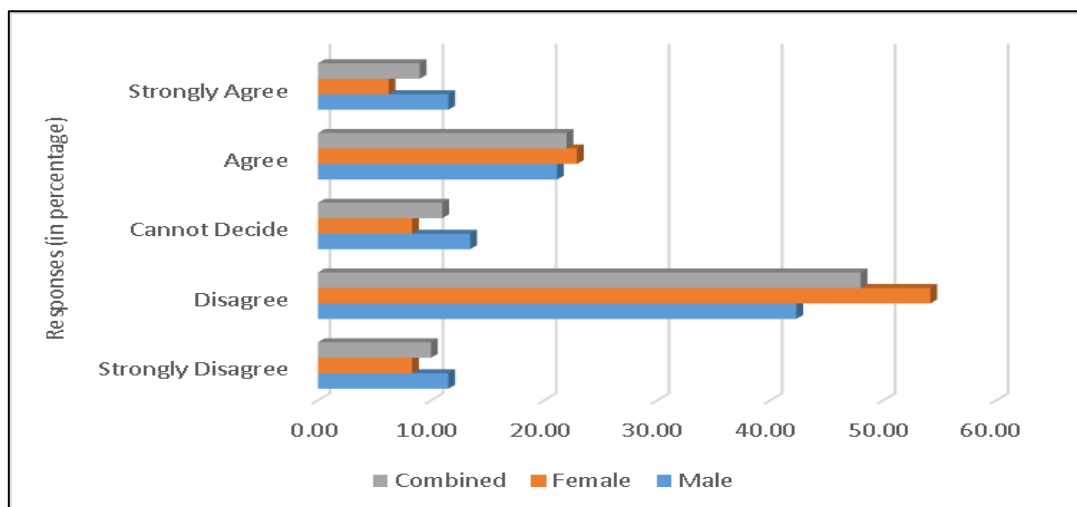
Arrangement of regular refresher courses for primary ELT



In the Fig. 6, it can be seen that 50% of the male teachers say that regular refresher theory courses are arranged for primary ELT, 17.31% disagree with them, other 9.62% strongly disagree, whereas 17.31% male teachers strongly agree with the statement. Hence, an overall inclination towards the opinion that refresher courses are arranged regularly. On the other hand, the opinion of female respondents is not very clear as 33.33% agree that refresher courses are arranged and 35.42% do not agree with them.

Figure 7

Contemporary technologies and primary teachers' acquaintance with them

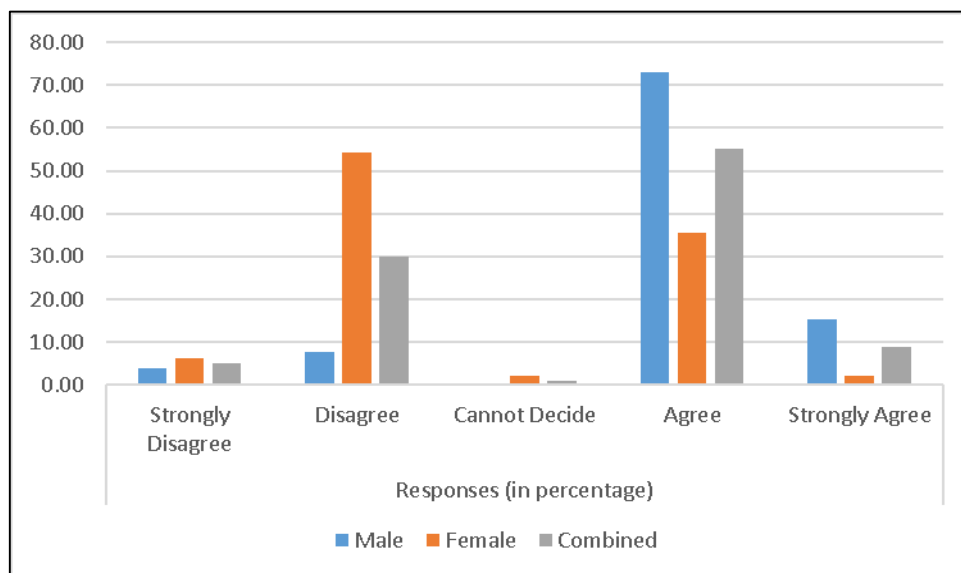


Other 10.42% are even not clear about what to say. In the figure 6 above, an overall inclination can be seen towards the opinion that regular theory refresher courses are arranged for primary ELT, though there as a significant opposition of the opinion against them.

Fig. 7 reveals that a clear majority of all the respondents holds that primary teachers are not well versed with the contemporary technologies used in the classroom. The percentage of male, female and combined respondents in this regard is 42.31%, 54.17% and 48% respectively. The same can be very clearly observed from the figure 7 given hereunder.

Figure 8

Regular use of lesson plans by the primary ELT teachers



In Fig. 8, it can be seen that 73.08% of the male teachers agree with statement saying lesson plans are properly prepared and used by the primary ELT teachers. 54.17% female respondents oppose them and say that lesson plans are not either prepared or used by primary ELT teachers. Figure 8 shows a very distinct and clear message by the respondents that lesson plans are regularly prepared and used by the primary ELT teachers, although a good number of female respondent teachers are on the other side. This can also be observed from the figure that almost all of the respondents were very clear about recording their opinion either in favor or against the statement.

Figure 9

Effectiveness of current teaching methods

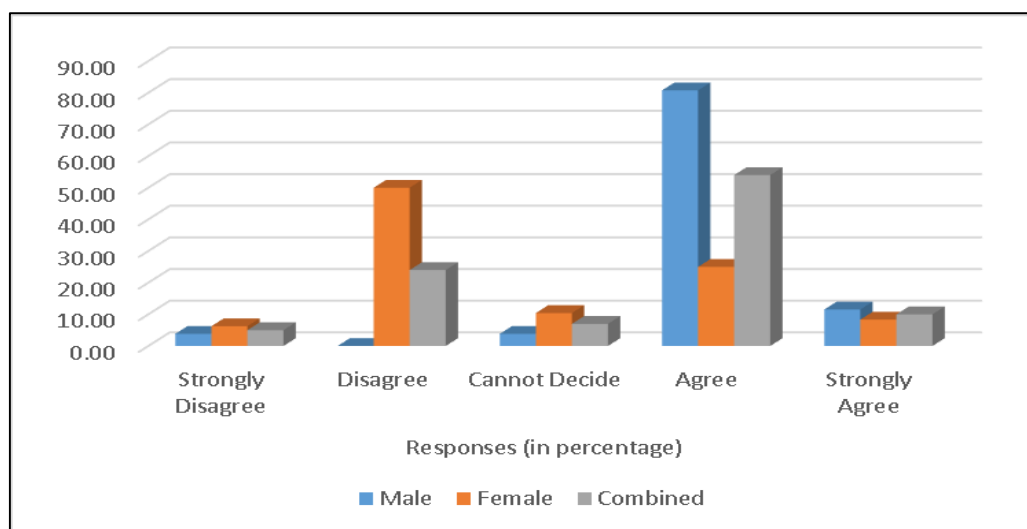


Figure 9 can be clearly interpreted in the favor of the statement that current teaching methods are effective despite of the fact that there is a sufficient opposition of the opinion from the female respondents. The figure also reveals that majority of the respondents was very clear about expressing their opinion in support of or in contradiction with the given statement, and that is why 7% could not clearly communicate their view about the statement. Table 4.9 reveals some interesting facts about the adequacy and effectiveness of the currently adopted teaching methods for the teaching of English language at primary level. 80.77% of the male respondents were of the opinion that current teaching methods are effective and other 11.54% strongly agreed with them. On the other hand, 50% of the female respondents did not agree with the majority of male respondents, whereas other 6.25% strongly supported the opinion of their female fellows. When looked at the figures brought forth by combining the male and female respondents, it can be stated clearly that majority of the respondents i.e. 54% were satisfied with the effectiveness of current teaching methodologies adopted in the classrooms. 24% opposed them. 10% were at extreme positive side, 5% on extreme negative side and 7% could not decide.

Figure 10

Pedagogical approach by the English language teachers in classrooms

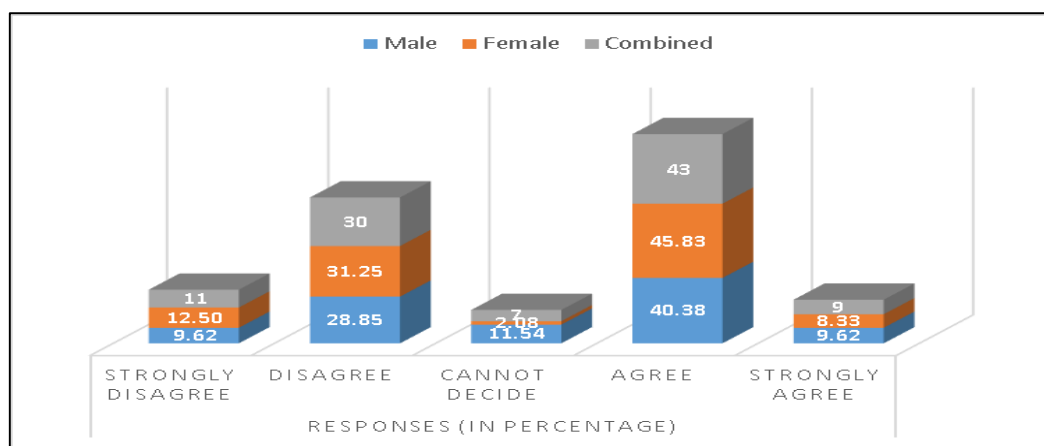


Figure 10 above very clearly supports the results derived from Fig.10 by showing a huge tower of respondents who hold that pedagogical approach is adopted. As per data shown in table 4.10, 43% of the total respondents were of the opinion that pedagogical approach is adopted in the classrooms of English language teaching. 40.38% of total male respondents and 45.83% of the female respondents were of the same opinion. Other 9% of the total respondents very strongly supported the opinion of former respondents. On the other hand, 30% of the total respondents' view was that pedagogical approach is not adopted in the classrooms by English language teachers and same opinion was strongly supported by 11% more of the respondents. The percentage of female respondents falling in this category was higher than male which was 31.25% and 28.85% respectively. 11.54% of the male respondents could not decide about what to opt for, whereas the percentage of female respondents who could not decide remained very low than male respondents and it was only 2.08% leading to a cumulative percentage of 7% of the total respondents in this category.

Discussion

This survey based descriptive study brought forth some interesting findings which are in conformity with the findings of other previous studies. However, there are a few context-specific findings which are unique in nature. It was found during this study that English

language teachers are not properly trained in how to teach the textbooks at primary level.

This finding is supported by a similar previous study conducted in Balochistan (Panezai & Channa, 2017).

According to Panezai and Channa (2017), in most of the primary schools in Baluchistan there is a dearth of teaching resources. A similar finding was brought forth in the current study and it was found that classrooms are not properly equipped with contemporary teaching accessories. Moreover, teachers of English language are not even trained to use modern teaching aids like multimedia projector, tablets and voice recorders etc.

Most of the English language teachers prefer to communicate with their students in their respective mother tongues instead of initiating conversation with the students in English. However, they want their students to speak English in the classrooms. Richards (2017) argues in one of the research study that teachers do not have sufficient vocabulary to confidently communicate with the students. This may be a result of improper qualification or inappropriate training as well (Panezai & Channa, 2017). Some other researchers take this attitude very positively and hold that this approach may develop multilingualism in the learners which is an asset (Haukås, 2016). It was found that almost all of the respondents claimed to follow pedagogical approach in the classroom but a fair majority of teachers did not engage in preparing lesson plans, which means there is an obvious lacking of pre-planning in language teaching. Studies have proved that planning lessons and lectures prior to the formal conduction of language classes is of great importance (Hung, 2015).

Female respondents of this study were of the opinion that classrooms in government girls primary schools are not properly equipped. This may be one of the reason why students find content of the textbook boring and teachers find difficulties in conducting the Language skills properly. Simple classroom technologies like use of interactive whiteboards may energize the young learners as has been proved by the studies (Balta & Duran, 2015). On the

other hand, more advance classroom equipment like multimedia projector displaying Power Point presentation may increase the interest of students far beyond the expectations of the teacher in addition to bringing ease to the teacher (Alkash & Al-Dersi, 2017).

Current study has discovered that students' family and cultural background has an important role in their language learning and academic achievement which is supported by a similar study conducted by (Panzai and Channa (2017)) in the context of Baluchistan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was a survey-based study, descriptive on the one hand in the manner that it brought forwarded the most common challenges faced by English language teachers at primary level. On the other hand, it was also somehow explanatory in terms that it attempted to very briefly explore and explain the causes behind these challenges. Many of the difficulties and challenges faced by English language teachers in government primary schools are due to poor public sector educational policies. For example, students-teacher ratio followed in government primary schools is very high and contrary to international standards. In the same manner, teachers are assigned multi-teaching tasks by accommodating more than one classes in single room, which causes deviation of attention on the part of both, students and teacher. There is an obvious gap of trust between the teaching staff and the monitoring staff of the current educational setup, which definitely ends up in the suffering of the pupils. There is a need to devise more efficient and fact-based teachers' evaluation system. Students' evaluation methods currently adopted are not target-oriented and they only test the memory of the students. Most of the language teachers are not satisfied with existing students' evaluation techniques. In most of the cases, community does not own the school where their children go to learn and acquire the knowledge of the language.

In the light of the conclusions given above, the researchers recommend the tackling of challenges adopting a multi-facial simultaneous approach. To achieve sustainable, far-

reaching yet thrifty outcomes, these would have to be addressed on immediate basis for instance remedies, and on the same hand, some long-term measures would also have to be taken to obtain durable results. Similarly, the community living in the catchment area of each school would have to play a role of partner with the government to resolve the issues on collective basis. And the last, but not the least, every teacher would have to participate in the remedial measure with their optimum enthusiasm for the betterment of their own selves as well as the prospective builders of the nation.

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