



Exploring the difficulties faced by students in practicing ELT at schools

⁽¹⁾Muna Abdualhussein | ⁽²⁾Abdul Majeed Hameed Joodi

^{1,2}Department of English, College of Education, Al-Farahidi University, Baghdad, Iraq.

Email: ¹m.hussein@uoalfarahidi.edu.iq | ²joodi53@uoalfarahidi.edu.iq

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Abstract

This study has been carried out at Alfarahidi University, Baghdad (Iraq) in an attempt to find out the leading problems in teaching English in Iraqi schools from the perspectives of the students who practice teaching English as part of their graduation requirements in the College of Education – English Department. The study used a qualitative method to investigate the teaching and learning challenges faced by the participants as teachers. An in-depth interview was used as an instrument to collect data of this study. The study has shown that there are many reasons beyond the flaws in English learning and teaching. For example; lack of learners' interest in English, limited facilities for learning, short period of teaching practice, and the school administration's lack of interest in allowing the college students to practice their tasks as teachers. The study recommended that colleges should allow students to practice teaching frequently, for example, by frequently letting them visit schools throughout the year. The school administrations must cooperate and be responsible for the students who practice teaching.

Background

Teaching English has always been a challenge in many countries where it is not the native tongue, making it challenging for students to learn a second language because they cannot use it in everyday situations to speak or deliver information. Students in schools normally learn sentences from textbooks rather than from real-world contexts. Due to this, teachers should use different strategies and seek the best methods of teaching that allow students to handle the difficulties that students face in learning (Chen, 2007; Nunn, 2011). Teaching English in a foreign setting, despite being fascinating, can be hard not only for teachers but also for learners. It is significantly affected by the influence of the mother tongue and the lack of exposure to English in daily life which hinders the learners' ability to communicate effectively in both oral and written form (Ashraf, T. A. 2018).

In the Iraqi context, the problem is there for both students and teachers. In fact, for decades Iraqi students have been denied access to conventional educational services. The human, financial, and other resources the education sector needs are severely lacking. Such situations make it difficult for students and teachers to remain motivated to learn and teach, particularly in English (Rashid, B. N., 2016). Iraq's inadequate educational system is affecting the country's English teachers. Without gaining enough knowledge and/or experience, they studied, received an education, and received a degree. The educational context does not support their ability to develop sound professional resolutions. In other words, many teachers lack adequate theoretical, aesthetic, and professional business teacher preparation [ibid].

One of these problems is the crowded classes. According to (Emery, 2012) "the packed homerooms and the effect of such a condition can influence educating and learning" (Emery, H., 2012, p.14). This point created many other difficulties such as the small size of the classroom, lack of desks, and noises, which made the teaching process neither comfortable nor enjoyable. Consequently, it is difficult for the teacher to be able to meet the student's needs and achieve the learning goals.

For the successful learning of English as a foreign language, practicing teaching English is very important. To teach language in classrooms or as a social communication tool, students often encounter or practice very little English both within and outside the classroom. It follows that English teachers have a greater obligation to create a supportive learning environment for their pupils and implement effective language learning strategies. Thus, teaching English as a foreign language requires a variety of complicated skills in addition to the teachers' language knowledge and teaching abilities (Richard, 1990).

The teacher is the only person in command of the classroom, which is typical in various Arab nations and of course, Iraq teachers are no exception. Because certain English books and curricula are regionally focused, students' roles in the classroom are ineffective. This may cause those students to struggle when it comes to comprehension, which is the most crucial component (Markham & Green, 1996). Besides, the environment has a significant impact on how well a foreign language is learned and taught. Most teachers explain the English language in a classroom setting frequently in their mother tongue. Students' native tongues make learning a new language challenging and challenging to complete. As a result, teachers could not feel comfortable learning or instructing in the English language, which could make it difficult for them. Berg, Petron, and Greybeck (2012) claim that native language has an impact on the acquisition of any second language or foreign language, the process could become challenging as a result. To make the instructions meaningful and to achieve effective language teaching in the classroom, some teachers are urged to gain a deeper understanding of the academic backgrounds of students.

Teachers can play a fundamental role in stimulating students toward language. Therefore, for students to be motivated, appropriate pedagogical techniques are required. Abrantes, Seabra, and Lages (2007) assert that students learn both directly and indirectly depending on their pedagogical impact, interest, and learning performance. In this study, one thousand students were included in the study's sample. The findings showed that the pedagogy employed in the classroom directly impacted students. The study found that greater levels of interaction between students and instructors, organization, likability, and responsiveness of the instructors, as well as student learning performance, all contribute to greater levels of pedagogical effects.

Finally, in Iraq, where there is no English environment and English is not taken seriously here, the teacher must be patient when teaching English. Students are not taught English properly in their schools for a variety of reasons both inside and outside the classroom. When students

leave schools and join universities to pursue professional degrees, they are required to study in English, and English suddenly becomes very important to them. Students get upset at this point. They want to study English but are helpless because they do not know how to read and write English correctly (Elttayef, A. I., & Hussein, N. O., 2017, p.2).

Research Methodology

Introduction

The researchers have conducted a qualitative case study that required to answer a “descriptive question” or “an explanatory question” (Yin,2012, p.5). To learn what is "happening" in cases of English teaching challenges and to learn its "explanations,". The problems of teaching English are presented by the 4th. class participants who practiced teaching in schools in the second semester of the Academic year 2022-2023 as a part of their graduation requirements.

Data Collection

Following Creswell (2012) who suggested a sample size of 4 to 5 for a single case study, the researchers chose four participants as a sampling size (2 males and 2 females). Creswell proposed that the sample can actively contribute to a better comprehension of the research problem and the central phenomenon in the investigation (Creswell, 2012, p. 156). The Participants are the 4th. class students who practiced teaching in schools in the second semester of the Academic year 2022-2023 as a part of their graduation requirements. The interview conducted at the English Department building after the students finished the teaching practice course and about to return to their classes, to ensure a quiet, comfortable, and free from interruptions to facilitate open and honest communication.

Data Analysis and Procedure

The participants were asked two questions: First, what are the difficulties you face in teaching English as a Foreign Language when you practice it in schools? Second: In your opinion, how could these difficulties be fixed? the findings are presented in two parts. The first part addresses the "difficulties" expressed by the participants; the second part focuses on the solutions view from the participants to overcome these difficulties. The data collected by taking notes from the participants who were provided with detailed information about how their data will be used. Consent was acquired before the interviews, and participants were guaranteed the privacy of their answers. To accurately capture the ideas and suggestions of the participants, the notes were recorded with great care. This method made sure that the participants were at ease and confident enough to express their genuine thoughts and feelings.

Findings and Discussion

According to the interviews, the four participants who were interviewed after practicing teaching English in schools as part of their graduation requirements faced difficulties when teaching because of the variations in the students' level. It is worth mentioning that the four participants share the same problems which from the researchers' point of view may be common in most Iraqi schools. All the participants as teachers agree that the most important difficulties, they faced were the discrepancy in the level of English which made it difficult, from their point of view, to achieve the goal they desired. Secondly, the participants stated that due to the lack of training, English teachers in general experience numerous challenges when

teaching English to students. They indicated that they need more training in the university and after graduation, which must be done by the Ministry of Education before the teacher teaches the subject. Additionally, there are difficulties related to the neglected school building, crowded classrooms, lack of school furniture, and the large number of students in the classrooms.

Finally, the participants mentioned other problems such as performing extra duties besides teaching which may affect the main task they are supposed to perform. e.g. asking the students to teach instead of other teachers or to take care of students in the school's yard. Demotivation is another difficulty faced by both students according to the participants and the participants themselves. Participants said they were demotivated because they thought that they were going to learn more if they practiced teaching. The supervisor's in the school dominated and imposed extra duties instead of monitoring the trainee and giving advice. Students indicated that they have the energy and will to give more in teaching but they lack the freedom. Beside that the administrations made it very difficult for them to benefit from the task they were supposed to do originally intended by imposed duties which are far from the goal they supposed to perform. Additionally, the period of practicing teaching was very short. The participants also noticed that the students in the school were demotivated because of the heavy duties they had to perform, the unqualified teachers, and the unsuitable condition of the school's infrastructure.

As mentioned earlier, the current qualitative study attempted to investigate the challenges of teaching English as a Foreign Language to students in Iraqi schools. The sample was four students from the University of Alfarahidi- college of Education – English Department who were supposed to practice teaching English in the schools as a part of graduation requirements. The researchers found that this study is consistent with prior studies conducted in Iraq and overseas through the use of semi-structured interviews. Khan, T.J., et al. (2017) identified many challenges for Pakistani English teachers, including ambiguity in linguistic policies, demotivation factors, teacher unrest, and a shortage of teaching materials in institutions [p.70].

Iraqi English teachers are victims of the country's ineffective and corrupt education system. Most of them studied, well educated, and graduated without having an adequate information and/or experience. The classroom surroundings do not encourage them to develop adequate professional judgment. In other words, they are not adequately prepared as theoretical, artistic, or business professional teachers [Rashid,2016, p.18].

Finally, in the light of the above discussion the following may be recommended; the Ministry of Education needs to focus sincerely on preparing schools in an appropriate way to accommodate a large number of students even if it takes time, students themselves should be motivated to make them enthusiastic about coming to school. The schools also can assist teachers in producing materials and strategies, that teachers can enhance their strategies, which include the techniques, methods, and media that will be used with the students. Finally: The participants recommended that because teaching English is not an easy task, the university must develop appropriate ways to prepare students to find solutions to the difficulties they may face in the future and period of training must be extended to give better results.

Conclusion

This study explores the difficulties encountered by the students who practiced teaching English as a part of their graduation requirements. Specifically, it has focused on the 4th Stage students at Alfarahidi University- College of Education- English Department. This study has explored these challenges in an attempt to examine the education system in Iraqi schools. Many challenges have been identified by the participants, including the school infrastructure, demotivation factors, teacher's unrest, and lack of teaching materials in the schools. This study

also made recommendations that might guide future researchers to undertake studies for other specializations in any educational situation.

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