

# Lived Experiences of ESL Teachers of Kolkata

Swati Gupta<sup>1</sup> & Arya Paul<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The present study dives deep to shed light on the lived experiences of language teachers during the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the government schools of Kolkata, West Bengal. A total of 50 English language teachers of secondary education (IX & X standard) participated in the research. The study used a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the lived experiences, faced challenges of ESL teachers and to put forth suggestions for the betterment of English language teaching. For this, a self-made questionnaire was applied, and a semi-structured interview was conducted on the sample. The findings revealed that overcrowded classrooms, usage of the Translation method by the teachers, lack of infrastructural facilities, and a high rate of student absenteeism often affect the teaching of English.

**Keywords:** Lived experiences; English as a Second Language (ESL); Secondary School Teachers

## BACKGROUND

The British rule has helped the English Language to enter India resolutely and get itself settled. Though India has approached eight decades of independence, the English language still holds a momentous place within the nation. Far from diminishing, its presence and role are expanding and evident, especially in the province of education.

Over the years, numerous commissions and committees have been constituted to review and suggest changes in the education system, addressing the needs and demands of learners and society at large. To settle the nationwide debate on language and its teaching and learning in different spans of education, the Three-Language Formula was introduced by the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) in 1956 and later adopted at the Chief Ministers' Conference in 1961. This formula emerged as a pragmatic policy framework aimed to balance among regional linguistic pride, national integration, and global engagement. It provides students with comprehensive linguistic exposure: the mother tongue or regional language, Hindi (or another Indian Language), and the English language. While the intent was integrative and forward-looking, its implementation raised many challenges and faced criticism. Albeit its relevance has again been

emphasised in the National Education Policy 2020, which provides flexibility of choice to the states while adopting three languages to foster cross-linguistic understanding, strengthening national unity, and enhancing global competence.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of the English language has expanded even further as it is functioning as a global lingua franca. Parents across cultures consider English proficiency as an essential skill for educational achievements, employment, and international opportunities. Due to this, it has generated increased interest in its teaching and learning, leading to the rise of English-medium schools across India from primary to higher education, showcasing the charm and attraction towards English. This significance is also reflected in West Bengal's decision to introduce English at the primary level. According to the pedagogical suggestions, language classrooms should ideally consist of 25-30 students, but Indian schools present a contrasting picture, where schools and, consequently, language classes tend to be overcrowded. In this reference, the present study aims to find out the lived experiences of ESL teachers, their challenges, and suggestions to improve language teaching-learning practices. A handful of research studies have been conducted

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1 Assistant Professor, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, Bihar, India.  0000-0001-9079-3937,  [swatigupta@cusb.ac.in](mailto:swatigupta@cusb.ac.in)

2 M.Ed. Student, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, Bihar, India.  [baarisharya@gmail.com](mailto:baarisharya@gmail.com)

in India as well as in other countries regarding the challenges in English language teaching.

The study “Obstacles to Teaching English in Saudi Arabia Public Schools: Teachers’ and Supervisors’ Perceptions,” conducted by Elyas and Grigri (2015), identified the obstacles while teaching English in public schools in Saudi Arabia faced by teachers and supervisors. The study highlighted the scarcity of basic infrastructural facilities, language laboratories, limited access to modern technologies, and in-service training programs for teachers, which consequently lowered the motivation of students.

Almubark (2016), in the research entitled “Exploring the Problems Faced by the Teachers in Developing English Writing Skills for the Students in Saudi Arabia,” focused on identifying the problems encountered by the teachers of the Arts Colleges affiliated to the University of Jazan. The findings indicated that many English teachers ignored learners with writing problems in the English classes due to their own limited knowledge about dealing with such problems effectively. Lack of TLM and overloaded English classrooms also increased the intensity of the challenges.

Kumar and Malekar (2017) attempted to bring forth the issues related to the difficulties of teaching English in rural schools of India. The study explored that the Grammar-Translation Method is used, leading to the use of vernacular language. Also, the ratio of students to teachers is high, leading to innumerable challenges for the teachers.

Hassan, Jamila, and Sultana (2019), in their study named “Problematic Areas of ELT at Secondary Level Schools in Bangladesh: Issues and Prospectus,” aimed to demonstrate the problematic areas of English language teaching and learning at secondary level schools in Bangladesh. The main findings were that a lack of opportunities for teachers to contribute to curriculum design, overcrowded English classrooms, poor salaries of teachers, and a lack of required facilities hinder the English Language teaching in these schools.

In a study entitled “The Problems faced by Teachers in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Nairobi City”, Husni (2020) focused on the hitches confronted by the teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in terms of classroom management and the media used. The findings revealed the considerable obstacles arising from

unsuitable classroom conditions, poor motivation, inadequate infrastructural provisions, and the scheduling of English classes, which were often placed at noon during the last period of the day. Similarly, Oeamoun and Sriwichai (2020) pointed out the problems and needs of pre-service teachers of the English language in Thailand reported that insufficient, tedious courses, uncontextualized content, and scarcity of aids were serious challenges endured by them.

A perusal of earlier studies indicates that the challenges met in ESL and EFL classrooms, either encountered by the teachers or students, are a global issue. Although a limited number of studies have investigated the same nationally and internationally. Notably, most of these studies relied primarily on quantitative methods to conclude. In light of this gap, the present study seeks to explore the lived experiences of teachers teaching ESL in the government schools of Kolkata by employing a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods. Recognising existing obstacles is a prerequisite to improving the teaching-learning practices and making them more engaging and effective. Hence, it also aims to gather practical suggestions and recommendations for smoothing the ESL classes.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To explore the lived experiences of the teachers during the teaching of English as a Second Language in the government schools of Kolkata
- To explore the challenges faced by teachers during the teaching of the English Language
- To explore the suggestions to improve the teaching and learning of the English Language

## **METHOD**

This study utilises both qualitative and quantitative research methods. To find out the lived experiences of teachers during their teaching of English (ESL) in the Government schools of Kolkata, the teachers were given closed-ended questionnaires, and to delve into the experiences in depth, suggestions and recommendations for improving the experiences of teachers related to English Language, interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire.

## **Sample & Sampling Technique**

The sample of the study consists of fifty English language teachers teaching in forty government schools at the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> standards of those

schools. To get the representative sample for the study multistage sampling technique was applied. At the first stage, forty government schools affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Education were selected by employing a purposive sampling technique. Then, all the English language teachers at the secondary level of selected schools were considered the sample of the study.

### **Research Tools Used and Statistical Techniques**

For collecting the data from the selected sample, a self-made questionnaire consisting of eighteen closed-ended items was used. Along with this, English language teachers were interviewed with the help of a semi-structured interview questionnaire. After collecting the quantitative data, considering its nature, descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) were applied, and qualitative data were analysed with the help of the content analysis technique.

### **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

Analysis of quantitative data resulted in the following conclusions:

- 60% of the teachers have stated that the English classes are held on the assigned days only. No extra English classes are scheduled or taken on working days. 40% of the teachers have stated that the English classes in their respective schools are conducted for more than 3 days in a week, while the majority of 60% of the teachers have stated that the English classes are conducted for around 3 days in a week in their respective schools. In none of the schools were English classes conducted for less than 3 days a week, according to the teachers.
- All the teachers have stated that the English classes in their respective schools are generally held in the first half, i.e, before the lunch break in their respective schools.
- 20% of the teachers have stated that majority of the students often seem to be excited during the English classes, and another 20% of the teachers have stated that majority of the students always seem to be excited during the English classes, while 60 % of the teachers have stated that majority of the students seem to be excited sometimes during the English classes in their respective schools.
- All the teachers showed their consensus about the ill effects of the overcrowding on English classes.
- 20% of the teachers have stated that they use English as a medium of communication in the Language classrooms, while a majority of around 80% of the teachers have stated that they use both English and Bengali as mediums of communication in the language classrooms at their respective schools.
- 70% of the teachers stated that the majority of the students, i.e., around 70%-90% of the students, carry their English textbooks to class daily, while 30 % of the teachers said that some of the students, i.e., around 40%-60% of the students, carry their English textbooks to class sometimes in their respective schools.
- 30% of the teachers stated that the majority of the students often respond during English classes, and another 20% of the teachers said that the majority of the students always respond in English classes, while 50 % of the teachers stated that the majority of the students respond sometimes during English classes in their respective schools.
- 40% of the teachers have stated that majority of the students are often capable of communicating in English, and another 50%of the teachers have said that majority of the students are always capable of communicating in English in the English classes, while 10% of the teachers have stated that the majority of the students are sometimes capable of communicating in English in their respective schools.
- 20% of the teachers have stated that majority of the students, i.e., around 70%-90% of the students, are capable of communicating in English in the English classrooms, while 80 % of the teachers have said that some of the students, i.e., around 40%-60% of the students are capable of communicating in English in the English classrooms in their respective schools.
- 60% of the teachers have stated that the students sometimes communicate in English outside the English classes, while 40 % of the teachers have said that the students rarely communicate in English outside the English classes in their respective schools.
- 90% of the teachers have stated that the students sometimes face difficulties while writing answers in English, while only 20 % of the teachers have said that the students rarely face difficulties while writing answers in English in their respective schools.

- 20% of the teachers have stated that the majority of the students, i.e., around 70%-90% of the students, face difficulties while writing answers in English, while 80 % of the teachers have said that some of the students, i.e., around 40%-60% of the students, face difficulties while writing answers in English in their respective schools.
- 10% of the teachers have stated that the marks of majority of the students achieved in English are better as compared to the marks achieved by them in the other subjects; while 80% of the teachers have said that the marks of majority of the students achieved in English are worse as compared to the marks achieved by them in the other subjects in the English classrooms in their respective schools. Also, 10% of the teachers have stated that the marks of the majority of the students achieved in English are similar to the marks they achieved in the other subjects.
- 60% of the teachers have stated that they often face difficulties while explaining certain concepts of Grammar in English due to the linguistic barriers of majority of the students, while 20% of the teachers have said that they always face difficulties while explaining certain concepts of Grammar in English due to the linguistic barriers of majority of the students and 20% of the teachers have said that they sometimes face difficulties while explaining certain concepts of Grammar in English due to the linguistic barriers of majority of the students in their respective schools.
- 80% of the teachers have stated that they often receive administrative support to carry out effective language classes, while 20% of the teachers have said that they always receive administrative support to carry out effective language classes in their respective schools.
- All the teachers have denied the presence of language laboratories in their respective schools.
- 60% of the teachers have stated that the parents/guardians of the students often seem to be supportive in the students' learning of the English language, while 40% of the teachers have said that the parents/guardians always seem to be supportive in the students' learning of the English language in their respective schools.

To explore the challenges faced by the teachers during the teaching of the English Language, a

semi-structured interview was conducted in which the teachers spoke about the challenges in detail:

- **Difficulty while explaining certain concepts:** While sharing their teaching experiences of approximately 10-15 years, the teachers have stated during their interviews that they often face difficulties while explaining certain concepts of Grammar, poems with double meanings in English, since most of the students are first generation learners and thus, they receive no guidance from their parents/guardians regarding the learning of a foreign language.
- **Bengali medium background:** Speaking about the most difficult part while conducting an effective English Language class, the teachers have confessed that since most of them have passed from Bengali medium schools, their own base in English is not as strong as needed, and that they often lack the required fluency. Thus, they are bound to take the help of their regional languages to make the concepts of English clear to the students.
- **High rate of absenteeism:** The teachers have expressed their concern about the high rate of student absenteeism. Some of the students belong to the lower socio- economic background, due to which they are forced to work in order to earn a living, hence they often miss their classes in order to go to work. The teachers feel that English being a second language requires continuity in its practice, but since many students are irregular in school, they often lag and are unable to keep up with others. Such situations become very tough for them to handle since a 45-minute class, as per the teachers, is not enough to cater to the needs of each student in a crowd of 60 students.
- **Approaches Used:** When asked about their approach to the English Language classes, they have said that they often use the Structural Approach to language teaching in order to give a firm base to the students' LSRW skills. Apart from this, they also take the help of the Grammar Translation Method due to their lack of required fluency, and also in order to make certain concepts of the English Language clear to the students.
- **Lack of Digital Infrastructure:** According to the teachers, a lack of digital infrastructure makes it difficult to motivate the students to actively participate in the teaching-learning process.

There are no whiteboards and projectors, and hence it becomes difficult to use the audio-visual aids in order to make the classes interesting. Textbooks that stand alone fail to capture the attention of the students, leading to a tedious classroom.

Seeking the suggestions of English language teachers for enhancing the teaching-learning of the English language, it was pointed out contentiously that language classrooms must maintain a pupil-teacher ratio, and it should not go beyond twenty-five students per teacher. According to them, schools should be equipped with advanced technologies such as language labs, smart boards, well-stocked libraries, and a stable internet connection. Language teachers recommended that other subject teachers also try to develop language skills in their own classes.

## CONCLUSION

Steps should be taken by the school administration to make the classrooms ICT-equipped, since audiovisual equipment gives much more language exposure to the students than just the written words of textbooks. ICT-led classrooms are not entirely a new phenomenon, rather it has been advocated since technology made its foot in the educational field. India, being a developing country, adapted it, but it could not reach every corner. Nevertheless, a significant shift occurred during the Pandemic, as educational institutions, which previously relied on traditional teaching methods, were compelled to adapt and embrace new approaches, i.e. ICT led teaching -learning. ICT-driven classrooms will surely motivate and provide multi-sensory clues to learners to develop their linguistic and communicative skills. Having an advanced language lab, a regular period in the class-schedule, and an experienced, trained instructor can bring desirable change. Periodic training programs for teachers to acquaint them with new engaging ICT tools like Kahoot, Answer Garden, Flipgrid, Podcast, MOODLE and others can break the monotony of the classroom and make it lively and engaging. Adequate provisions should be made by the school administration for infrastructural facilities. A mechanism to gauge the progress should be devised by the teachers for constructive feedback and self- paced progress. The administration should look into both the infrastructural requirements to teach the English language in the interest of the students and make

sure that the potential of the teachers is commensurate with the requirements of the students. Flexibility should be given to the teachers to devise their own ways and mechanisms to bring out the best in the students.

The findings of this study provide a gateway to manage many challenges in the process of teaching and learning the English Language. This type of study would help to address many challenging research questions in teaching English at the secondary level. It would create a sense of awareness and positive attitude among the parents, students, teachers, community members, government officials, and various other stakeholders about the effective teaching of English as a Second Language in the secondary schools. This study would help to bring necessary changes in the existing policies and devise new policies for the effective teaching of English as a Second Language at the secondary level. It would help to conduct many workshops and programs to help the teachers to overcome their uneasiness in using English as a second language efficiently.

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