

**A LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE OF THE CHALLENGES FACED IN
LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN
POST-CONFLICT SRI LANKA: A CASE STUDY OF THE MADHU ZONE IN
MANNAR DISTRICT**

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ABSTRACT

Learning English as a Second language (ESL) is considered as a challenging task. It is even more difficult in an undeveloped rural area like Madhu education zone in the Mannar district which was devastated by the three decade long ethnic conflict. Learners encounter many challenges when learning English in this area. Thus this study is an analysis of the challenges faced by learners in learning English as the second language in post conflict Mannar district. The objective of the study is to find out the major educational challenges that students face in learning English in the Madhu zone of Mannar district. The methodology employed in gathering information was questionnaires. The sample comprised of 100 students aged between 14 to 16 years including 45 males and 55 females and 10 teachers teaching English to these students. The data were analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings of the study indicated that lack of exposure, lack of opportunity to practice English outside the classroom, lack of facilities and poor economic conditions were the main external challenges faced by students. In addition psychological factors such as fear, anxiety and negative attitudes act as barrier that hinder the process of learning. Apart from these challenges lack of qualified teachers, use of faulty teaching methodology and deficiency in materials contribute to the challenges. Another major finding was the inability of students to write simple grammatically correct English sentences and this is an indication of the proficiency level of students which is alarming. The results of teachers' questionnaires were consistent with the results of students. Eventually recommendations in the light of findings are also discussed in this paper which will help the students overcome the challenges.

Key Words: ESL, Post-conflict, challenges, learning English.



INTRODUCTION.

English language enjoys a position which no other language does because it is more than a means of communication; it is a language of power, prestige and upward social mobility. Hence there is a great tendency among non-native speakers of English to learn this powerful language. However learning English is not as easy as the desire to learn it because many researchers and teachers have identified that teaching and learning English has always been a difficult and tedious process. Even though, many efforts have been taken to facilitate English language learning, failure on the part of students to achieve the desired level of proficiency, substantiate the fact that there are many challenges that hinder the process of learning English. In a country like Sri Lanka doing a study focusing on the challenges encountered by learners in learning English is crucial as this country was battered by the three decade long conflict and now slowly recovering. For the development process English language is vital. Madu zone in Mannar district has been chosen for this study because it was not only entirely devastated by the conflict but also identified as the very difficult area. At this juncture a study of this nature will be beneficial for the education policy making and to uplift the standard of these learners by empowering these students with the knowledge of English language.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

The main research objective is to find out the major educational challenges that students face in learning English in the Madhu zone of Mannar district. With regard to English language learning in the Madu Education zone of Mannar district, the level of students' English proficiency is very low. So why is it low and what are the challenges students face in learning English?

Literature Review

Literature pertaining to the challenges encountered by the learners and teachers in learning and teaching English as a second language or foreign language is abundantly available. For the purpose of this study research done in different parts of the world such as Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Turkey, Bangladesh, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and other developing countries have been analysed. Each of these countries have different socio political and cultural orientation, despite the difference, all these countries try to promote English language learning after understanding the unique place occupied by English in the global arena. Though researches were done in different contexts, many of the challenges identified by researchers seem to be common among many learners. However the difficulties encountered by the education sector especially with regard to learning English in the post war situation in the Mannar district is a new area of study, which will be explored in this research.

Different researchers have studied the challenges faced by learners while learning English in different perspectives and among different age groups of learners. Some

researchers solely view it in terms of psychological impact, that is, how the negative attitudes of students towards English language hinder the students from learning English. Similarly some others identified that the background of the students is the major challenge whereas the linguistic difference between the mother tongue and English language was identified as a challenge. According to Fernando, Raja (2011), Selvi (2011) and Verghese (2011) poor family background and rural setting are the main challenges in learning English. Due to the poor economic background they do not have access to English speaking environment and also to materials. In addition many researchers are of the view that lack of exposure to English and less opportunity to practice English other than classroom are the major challenges found across many contexts. (Khan, 2011, Teevno, 2011, Kannan, 2009, Raja, 2011 and Selvi, 2011). Since English is a language it is meant to be acquired first instead of being learnt. Therefore learning English becomes difficult when students try to limit the learning to classroom. "English is not a subject which can be taught; it is a subject which must be learnt" (Mackay, 2002). "Language acquisition process is based on the social and cultural processes that occur through everyday life" (Keil, 2008). However this is not the case in many of the contexts.

Khan (2011) has identified that the major challenge for students to learn English arises due to the difference in English and Tamil syntax, pronunciation, vocabulary etc. This means the linguistic structure is the barrier. However he has not neglected other social factors that make it difficult to learn English. He also pointed out lack of hard work, lack of exposure, fear, hesitation and mother tongue influence are the major challenges. "Learners often commit linguistic mistakes of syntax and pronunciation as an effect of the interference of L1 known as L1 transfer or Interlingua transfer" (Dulay, 1982). His research samples were selected from high school students in Indian rural context. In addition his research also analysed the contribution of the deficiency in teaching methodology that make it difficult for the learners to learn English. Mustafa Faruk Ahamed (2013) did an extensive research on "the difficulties and challenges in teaching English as the second language" focusing on "the reasons behind the challenges faced by both learners and teachers from the perspective of pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar of English language" (Ahamed, 2013). He limits the analysis only to the linguistic challenges which occur due to the difference between English and Tamil linguistic structure. So in a way his study is an extension of one of the challenges identified by Khan (2011). He suggests that drilling method can be used to improve grammar while the use of audio-visual methods can be used to make grammar classes interesting.

Keil (2008) took a different angle to analyse the challenges. She analysed the psychological challenges that hinder the English learning of students in her research, "English as a second language, what challenges arose for students". Her findings show how the affective filter acts as a challenge for learners. Moreover she emphasized on the fact that the absence of English language acquisition is a main challenge for learners. Her study focused only on the challenges faced by learners whereas the previous researchers identified challenges in relation to both teaching and learning. Moreover Fernando did a research in the Sri Lankan context selecting samples from rural areas of Negombo. Her research is similar to my research but the contexts are different. Her findings show that rural background, unsupportive attitudes of parents and unfamiliar teaching methods affect the process of learning English. Thus her study focuses on how the environmental factors and

psychological factors act as challenges for students to learn English. In addition, Karunaratne (2003) focused on the challenges faced by students in learning English by taking her samples from the urban context. Her findings are very similar to the findings of Nathali. But for Nathali poor family background and rural setting are the major challenges. Karunaratne's (2003) study indicates that urban setting is no better than rural setting when it comes to the learning and teaching of English. Her study shows that excessive dependence on the mother tongue, reluctance or shyness to talk and read in English, frequent absenteeism of students and teachers, overcrowded classrooms and lack of confidence are the major challenges students and teachers face. Barel (2015) did his study selecting the samples from schools in Nepal. Like Mannar in Sri Lanka Nepal also experienced war. His findings suggest that lack of proficient English teachers and poor infrastructure facilities due to war are the major challenges faced by students. In addition Teevno's (2011) study focuses on the challenges faced by learners and teachers. Her findings show that lack of proper training to teachers, lack of facilities, deficiency in curriculum, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient allocation of time and no use of technology are the major challenges faced by learners and teachers. She made an interesting observation highlighting on the fact that "English is taught as the subject not as the language" (Teevno, 2011).

Kannan (2009) did a research on the challenges students face in learning English and the findings of this study clearly indicates that bilingualism acts as a challenge in learning English. His samples were selected from secondary schools in rural India. He states that "as students are hailed from rural areas, bilingual method is adopted in language classes. This method helps only to slow learners to some extent" (Kannan, 2009). In addition he identified some other challenges such as exam-oriented learning as opposed to Skill oriented learning, lack of adequate practice and mixing of both slow learners and competent learners are the challenges that make it difficult for learners to learn English. Moreover Raja (2011) and Selvi (2011) did their research selecting samples from higher and secondary students based on the Indian context. Their findings reveal that both psychological and environmental challenges hinder the students from learning English. In addition Non conducive environment, lack of exposure, poor reading habit, negative attitudes, and lack of self-confidence, poor family background and poor classroom conditions also make the process of learning English difficult. Moreover Verghese (2009) in his study also has the similar findings that Raja (2011) and Selvi (2011) identified. However he makes an interesting observation that "In the case of the mother tongue the child learns it easily due to the favourable environment and by great amount of exposure to the language. But learning a second language in most cases is limited"(Bose quoted Verghese 2007). This observation indicates that challenges arise in learning English simply due to the absence of language acquisition.

Pande's (2013) study focuses on challenges faced by teachers in teaching English. His findings indicate that "the way English is taught is to a great extent responsible for the failure" (Pande,2013). He analyses how the classroom environment and psychological problems that occur in classroom settings hinder the efficiency of teaching English as the second language. He also states that the fact that two major skills such as listening and speaking are neglected when teaching English is the reason behind the failure because knowing a language invariably means speaking that language. This does not happen in the English learning

process. All these literatures show that though the challenges faced by students in learning English differ from context to context there are many reasons as to why it is difficult for the students to gain proficiency in English. Awareness of these challenges are important in order to find remedies to overcome these challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Sample

The sample of 100 students aged between 14 to 16 years (including 45 boys and 55 girls) studying in the government secondary schools were selected from five schools in the Madu education zone in Mannar district. In addition ten teachers teaching English for the above students were also selected. Details of the number of students selected from these schools are as follows. 6 boys and 9 girls were selected from Mn/ Periyakunchukulam RCTMS, Murunkan, Mannar. In addition 7 boys and 10 girls from Mn/ Kakkaiyankulam.M.V, Iranaiiluppaikkulam, Vavuniya were also selected. Moreover I have chosen 13 boys and 17 girls from Mn/ Periyamadhu. M.V, Periyamadhu, Mannar. Also from Mn/Sinnavalayankaddu.GTMS, Iranaiiluppaikkulam 12 boys and 10 girls were selected. Finally 7 boys and 9 girls were selected from Mn/Pappamodai RCTMS. Thirukkethiswaram. These samples of students and teachers were selected by using simple random sampling system.

Research Instrument

For the purpose of collecting data about the challenges faced by students in learning English, two different questionnaires were administered among the students and teachers. These questionnaires included a variety of questions such as closed questions, multiple choice questions and open ended questions that required students to give short answers as well as long answers and the research participants could have freedom to express anything they want, pertaining to the questions asked.. After the questionnaires were designed, it was consulted with the research supervisor to check the appropriateness and content validity. In terms of the analysis part most of the data were analysed quantitatively to comprehend the major challenges. In addition some open ended questions were included in the questionnaire in order to get students to write about the specific issues they have and the data obtained from these questions were analysed qualitatively in order to identify the specific challenges faced by individual students. Most of the questions included in the teachers' questionnaires required teachers to write the challenges faced by students in detail. These questionnaires were designed to find out the psychological factors, environmental factors, English learning experiences, classroom teaching and learning experiences and linguistic differences between the mother tongue and English that make the process of learning English difficult.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the data collected the challenges can be primarily divided as external challenges and internal or psychological challenges. Further it can be sub classified as challenges related to teaching materials, curriculum, classroom learning experiences and linguistic challenges. Based on the data collected from 100 students and 10 teachers from 5 schools in the Madhu zone, the following challenges have been identified.

1. Lack of Exposure to English and Less Opportunity to Practice English outside the Classroom

In order to improve a language getting exposure to that language is vital. In Madhu zone learning English is considered as a difficult process due to the lack of exposure. Madhu zone is a very rural area where people speak only Tamil as a means of communication. Therefore the students get no exposure to English in this environment. 85% of the students have no exposure to English at all in their environment. 15% of the students stated that whatever the opportunity they get to hear people speaking in English is outside this area, that is, when they go on trips they get opportunity to listen to tourists speaking English. However this exposure is not sufficient because this area is not a tourist destination and students do not get opportunity to go on trips frequently.

Though getting exposed to English speaking environment outside school is not possible, having access to media is a good opportunity to get exposure to the authentic sources of English. Given the poor economic condition and education level of the people in this area only 10% of the students have access to television while 5% of the students have access to social media. Thus it is evident that 85% of the students get exposed to English only at school. However schools fail to provide the adequate exposure. Because students get only 45 minutes per day to learn English. Within this time the teachers' use of English is inadequate as they focus on finishing the syllabus than teaching English. As a result students get no exposure to English. In addition students do not have any opportunity to use English outside classroom as Tamil is sufficient to fulfil their needs. This is indeed a biggest challenge.

2. Poverty and Low Education Level of Parents as a Challenge

Majority of the parents belong to the lower rungs of the society. Comparatively all men are employed while 83% of the women are unemployed. In addition 76% of the students' fathers do working class jobs while 1% is veterinary and 23% are unemployed. Moreover 2% of mothers engage in self-employment whereas 2% of mothers are doing government jobs and 13% of mothers do minor jobs.

Occupation of parents indicate their financial status and educational background. Though Sri Lanka provides free education poverty can affect a child's education because according to 60% of the teachers students' attendance to school is not satisfactory and the reasons for absenteeism are family problems and economic problems. In addition students do not have much resources to learn English due to poverty. Similarly due to the low education level of the majority of parents, students may find it difficult to study as they cannot get help from their parents when studying. Thus students' family background can hinder the students' learning of English.

3. Unavailability of Private English Classes

In Sri Lanka the support given by the private classes to the process of learning English is undeniable. At present going to private classes is a trend, in fact it can be a substitute for the deficiency made in school. However 87% of the students do not attend private English classes.

4. Limited Time Allocated for the Teaching of English.



Since English is a language and learning a language is time consuming, more time should be allocated to teach and learn English unlike other subjects. However in the school system only a limited time is allocated to teach English. According to 83 students number of periods allocated per week is 5 and each period is conducted for 45 minutes and 17 students stated that 6 periods are allocated per week for English. However allocation of time for English is not enough because it is only during English period that the students get opportunity to learn English and since these students have less exposure to English outside school and the majority of the students do not attend private classes, limited time allocation is indeed a challenge.

5. *Non-conductive Classroom Learning Environment Caused by Lack of Learner Autonomy.*

Any ideal class room is expected to be learner centred. Especially for language development letting the learners to learn on their own through trial and error is vital. In a classroom where learner autonomy is to be maintained the role played by the teacher should be reduced, that is, learners should be given more chance to do the classroom talking than the teacher. But in these classrooms there is no room for learner autonomy. 85 students stated that there is no learner autonomy as all the classroom talking is done by the teacher

6. *Mother Tongue Influence or Dependence as a Challenge.*

Learning a second language is considered as a difficult process due to the influential role played by the mother tongue. When learning a second language, a learner usually thinks about the target language in terms of the first language without realizing the fact that a language should be learnt in that language. However there are differences of opinion whether mother tongue use should be completely avoided when learning a second language. Some are of the view that mother tongue should not be used at all while others believe that it can be used to a certain extent. Especially when teaching a second language there is a huge tendency among teachers and students to use mother tongue as a means of communication and to facilitate learner understanding. According to the data 95% of the students and 90% of the teachers view mother tongue influence as a barrier.

7. *Lack of Facilities*

Since Madhu zone is rural and situated far away from town area, it certainly lacks facilities. Considering the poor economic condition of students, unavailability of private English classes and the fact that all the students solely depend on school, arranging extra class is necessary. However no extra class is arranged for the students. 80% of the students stated that the school does not conduct extra classes for English. The reasons for not conducting extra classes is due to poor financial facility of the school and insufficient number of English teachers. 60% of the teachers stated that there is no sufficient number of teachers to teach English.

8. *Fear and Anxiety as a Challenge*

Fear and anxiety are two psychological factors that make the process of learning difficult. Fear is created by several reasons such as the bitter learning experiences associated with English language learning, non-conductive classroom experiences and bad exam results. Anxiety occurs in the classroom learning environment. Krashen stated that "Low anxiety appears to be conducive for second language

acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety” (Krashen, 1982). Thus depending on the learners’ level of anxiety the likelihood of learning a language increases or decreases. Based on the data 90% of the students and 100% of the teachers agreed that fear is a challenge.

9. Internalization of the Fact That English is a Difficult Language

The main problem for students while learning English is the fossilization of the idea that English is the difficult language. So as a result, they do not make attempts to learn and understand it. Because of this thought learning English has become more difficult for them. According to the data 70% of the students consider English as a difficult language, 10% of the students did not say anything and 20% of the students are of the view that English is not a difficult language.

10. English Grammar as the Most Difficult Area

Learning English entails learning many aspects ranging from learning English letters to grammar and four skills. However in the school curriculum much emphasis is given to the teaching of grammar. As a result learners have developed a misconception that is learning grammar is learning English. Majority of the students find grammar as the most difficult area therefore they dislike learning English. 55% of the students chose grammar as the most difficult area. Complementing with this finding 70% of the teachers stated that majority of the students find English grammar difficult. Thus the fact that English grammar is difficult for the students is a challenge.

11. Speaking is Completely Ignored in the Classroom

Learning a language should necessarily make learners to speak that language. But with regard to English language learning in Sri Lanka speaking is the most neglected area because of the fact that speaking is not tested in the national level exam. As a result this skill is not developed. According to the data 99% of the students said that English is not spoken during English period.

Linguistic challenges

In terms of the structure English and Tamil are different. When the students try to apply the structure of Tamil to English then they will end up producing grammatically wrong sentences. But it does not mean that the students do not know the structure rather they commit this mistake repeatedly. I asked students to list the difference between English and Tamil sentence structure and all the students correctly stated the sentence structure: for English SVO and for Tamil SOV. However when I gave them two simple sentences in Tamil and asked them to translate to English 96% of the students’ translation was wrong.

Tamil sentence- “**Naan paadasaalaikku Poanen**”

English translation- “**I went to school**”

But only 4 students got the translation correct. The rest of the students did as follows.

For example

Student 1- “Im whent to school”

Student 2- “I am going to school”



Student 3- "Iam school hoink"

Student 4- "Iam goes to the school"

Student 5- "I wen to school"

Student 6- "I am go to school"

From the above examples the proficiency level of students in English is evident. This mistake occurred due to direct translation. This is a common challenge that many students face. But 96% of the students committing this kind of mistake is an eye opener because this is not a complex sentence.

CONCLUSION

Learning English as a second language is a challenging task across many contexts. Compared to urban contexts learners in the rural area encounter many challenges due to the lack of physical resources. Especially in the context of Madhu zone the situation is even worse as it was devastated by war. Government along with other organizations make attempts to improve all the sectors including education sector in this area. Despite the efforts made, the education level of students does not show much progress. In this context the condition of English is far more worse because the students have more pressing challenges that hinder the process of learning English.. Therefore it is the need of the hour to identify the current challenges faced by these students with regard to English language learning and to provide them with timely solutions to overcome these problems.

Lack of facilities and opportunity to learn English have been identified as the major environmental challenges. Since the people in this area are predominantly speaking Tamil and there is no need for another language, as a result, English speaking environment is hardly seen. In addition though the school is responsible for creating an environment that provides adequate exposure to the language, the school fails to do this task due to the time constraint and the fact that the teacher uses more amount of Tamil.in class. Given the poor economic condition of the students, attending private English classes is unaffordable. Similarly they do not have access to media and social media which can give exposure to English. Since these students do not have access to any of these facilities, English learning has become the challenging task. In addition psychological factors like fear and anxiety contribute to reduce the students' intrinsic motivation to learn English. Moreover over dependence on mother tongue, difficulty level of materials, deficiency in materials, use of traditional teaching methodology, lack of qualified teachers and difficult linguistic structure of English act as barriers that hinder the learning process. Thus immediate measures should be taken to help students overcome these challenges.

RECOMMENDATION

First and foremost measures should be taken to eradicate students' fear, anxiety and negative attitudes towards English. It can be done by creating awareness among students about the importance of learning English. In addition to this classroom environment should be made learner centred so that the students feel comfortable to learn in class. Though the schools possess the necessary materials and technological facilities, these are not used for the process of learning English, thus steps should be taken to utilize these materials in language classrooms. Since majority of the students have economic problems and private tuitions are not

available in this zone, steps should be taken to arrange extra English classes for students. Successful learning does not only involve active participation of the learners but also the teacher's role is equally important. Therefore when recruiting English teachers focus must be given not only to their educational qualification but also their English proficiency level must be tested.

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