

An Empirical Research: The Use of International English Testing System as a Tool to Assess the English Language Teachers' Language Proficiency

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Abstract

This empirical research uses IELTS as the benchmark to assess ESL teachers' language proficiency and check its effect on the language learning of ESL students in Pakistan. In order to collect the data for this study, 60 ESL students at an intermediate level were selected from the eight different language centers in Lahore, Pakistan. Later, they were taught by the teachers who have different scores in their language proficiency tests i.e., IELTS (band 8, band 7 and band 5 respectively). The results of this empirical research reveal that ESL teachers' language proficiency affects the language learning of ESL students to a great deal. One of the main reasons is the lack of proficient ESL teachers that corresponds to the improper and faulty criteria of their recruitment. Therefore, the current study posits that the selection of ESL teachers must also be determined with the levels of their proficiency in English.

Keywords

English Teacher Education, ESL: English as a Second Language, English Language Proficiency, English Teacher's Proficiency, IELTS: International English Language Testing System

1. Introduction

According to Kachru, Pakistan is the third largest country in South Asia, where English as a second language is used by 18 million Pakistanis, especially in the field of education and profession.¹ As a result, English has got prime importance in the multilingual society of Pakistan and this significance is acknowledged by introducing English as a compulsory subject from class 1 in the government and private schools of Pakistan. In spite of all the efforts by the Government, in the education sector of Pakistan, the move which learners expected to make while utilizing English as the language of learning in

advanced education was a matter of extraordinary trepidation as explained by Khan². He elaborates that in Pakistan, English has not been taught as a language but it is rather taught as a subject, with the use of Urdu or any regional language, as a medium of communication in the classroom. This creates a lot of problem for the students when they enter the college and university level where most of the subjects are taught in English. Besides, there are numerous other factors that influence the language competencies of the learners; less proficient and incompetent English teachers, ambiguous government policies, aimless syllabus design and material development emphasizing reading and writing skills and ignoring listening and speaking skills.

However, from the earlier mentioned factors, the effect of the teachers' proficiency on the learning of the learners cannot be ignored. Especially, in Pakistan where the teachers are non-native English speakers and most of them have limited proficiency in English. One of the reasons for poor language proficiency of ESL teachers in Pakistan is the improper selection criteria that check their professional knowledge but does not measure their English language proficiency. This research aims to propose that IELTS can be used to examine ESL teacher's proficiency in addition to testing their subject knowledge.

2. Literature Review

Donald³ stresses that the language development should be subjected to the free interaction among the learners and their innovative use of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). According to Masitsa, all the kind of learning is based on the medium of instructions. The command of language determines all the learning of a student.⁴ De Wet⁵ further claims that in the early years of education the native language is the best medium of the learning. Ellis and Barkhuizen⁶ posit that the researchers, for the most part, discuss 'second dialect skill'. However, dialect analyzers and instructors allude to 'second dialect capability'. These two names speak to distinctive understandings of the results of second dialect acquisition. Furthermore, they explain that

competence referred to the grammar of the language rather than proficiency, which is the level of ability with which one can utilize a language. According to them, competence referred to the knowledge of language and proficiency related not only to the knowledge but also the utilization of the language knowledge in the real-time communication.

However, Norris⁷ reports the findings of research conducted in Australia about the language proficiency of teacher. According to his respondent's feedback pedagogical knowledge, cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge are the major three components of teacher's language proficiency. The emphasis was on the Linguistic knowledge which was defined with three different approaches. The first approach explains the linguistic knowledge in terms of four basic language skills. The second approach illustrates the linguistic knowledge in technical terms (i.e. sociolinguistic, pragmatic). The third approach emphasizes the need for successful communication of teacher in the classroom settings. Thus, he proposes that a measure of teacher's language proficiency is the ability to use the language in a competent and confident manner in an unpredictable scenario in the classroom. Similarly, Nel and Müller posit that teachers with insufficient proficiency in English are the major barriers to second language acquisition and proficiency problems faced by the learners⁸. Therefore, they conclude that the poor caliber of the teachers is one of the major reasons for poor teaching at schools.

Furthermore, Krashen argues that the most important and fundamental standpoint is that the learner of the second language gets information through the instructor's talk.⁹ So, the teacher must not only know the level of understanding of the learner but also, he must come and speak at the level of his learner and even the learner must have capability and capacity to comprehend the instructor as suggested by Richards & Lockhart.¹⁰

According to Stander, when the knowledge and information are being transferred to the learner by the teacher, the language competence and subject knowledge of the teacher play a very important role.¹¹ It means, if the instructor is not proficient in the use of the second language, the knowledge transferred to the learner will be defective and substandard. In result, the problems of the teachers will be taken by the student. Therefore, Marinova-Todd¹² proposed that quality input of language to the learner ensures the best result in the acquisition of language because the good input of information guarantees the native-like competency in the second language learner. As far as the language proficiency of the teachers is concerned, Le and Willey suggest, "The teachers' general proficiency significantly affects the way they use language in the classroom to promote learning"¹³. Similarly, Art Tsang reports,

"the teachers' general linguistic competence plays an important role in ELT classrooms"¹⁴. Additionally, the instructor should be the real-time role model for the learner and he should use the aids and systems, which the learners ultimately have to exploit. According to Chomsky, "the constrained illustration of the language, faulty and unorganized input is a consistent issue of the language learning" cited by Mitchell & Myles.¹⁵ Therefore, it can be said that the language teacher's proficiency is very vital for developing competence in language learners.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, it has been one of the important post-colonial countries so English enjoys the status of the most significant second language and official language in government. It has got a position that no other language has got. It survived the test of time and policymaker. According to English language teaching policies in Pakistan, the English language plays a vital role in education. English language is, therefore, a compulsory subject from the Class 1 in public primary schools, and is also the medium instruction for science and mathematics in secondary and middle school, for science and technology at the intermediate level, and for all subjects at university level. Now, English has got universalistic dimension in Pakistan as the demand for English language teaching and learning has been increased massively in the whole world. To meet the challenges and requirements of higher education in Pakistan and compete for the job market globally, Government of Pakistan is focusing to produce communicatively competent speakers of English declared by Ministry of Education.¹⁶ According to Shamim, the gravity of the seriousness can be understood by the fact that the higher education commission (HEC) has allotted a large budget for the planning, research, and implementation of reforms of English language teaching in the country.¹⁷ For this very purpose, National Committee on English (NCE) has been established in 2003 for the assessment of learning and teaching situation in higher education. NCE found that the level of English proficiency is very low in students of Public Sector University. And it has been further exposed that most of the teachers in public sector are neither have formal qualification nor proper training to teach the English language. Therefore, Warsi claims that in Pakistan the teaching of English language is not that much satisfactory, it doesn't help the learners to acquire language.¹⁸ One of the main reasons suggested by Nunan & Lam is that the method of syntactic examples is adopted for teaching the English language in Pakistan and the learner concentrate on reading and writing rather than using English in daily life.¹⁹ Keeping in view the need for English language many training projects to teach the English language has commenced. In Sindh, the government has arranged English

language teaching (ELT) programs for English language educators in collaboration with Society of English educator (SPELT) and British Committee. Despite all these actions, the progress for the improvement of English language is not considered satisfactory and up to the mark in Pakistan and there are numerous barriers to learning the English language. Some of these hindrances as mentioned by Saeed, Zia & Saeed are the poor examinations system, too much strength of students in the class, the traditional method of teaching, lack of required facilities and the most important the non-proficient teachers. However, English language education is continuously deteriorating because of an inconclusive language policy, uneven experiment with curriculum, production of varieties of textbooks, inefficient teachers and above all directionless classroom practices.²⁰ In the similar kind of research, Coleman also finds noticeable reasons, why the standard of English language education in Pakistan does not match to a global standard of English language teaching. According to him, the first reason is that the English language is an examination subject in Pakistan which promotes rote learning methods to pass the exams and get good grades, and the second reason is that the English language is not used at all by the teachers in classrooms.²¹ Further, the findings of Coleman is supported by Gul & Aziz who have proved that the teachers, as well as students, do not use English language either in the classroom or outside as their examination system does not require them to be proficient in speaking skill.²² Though the importance of the four fundamental language competencies i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing have been considered necessary to learn a second/ foreign language as argued by Bel & Luis.²³ Karim²⁴ also informed about lack of opportunities and platform for speaking and practicing English which according to Fiorito lead to poor communication and vocabulary development.²⁵ Realistically speaking, the most significant reason for the poor proficiency of the ESL students in the context of Pakistan is that the people mostly assume that a person who has studied English, can also teach English. A report (PEELI Report, British Council) on private and government English teachers says that 62% of the private English teachers and 56% of government English teachers have shown the lowest score in their APTIS test.²⁶ Ironically these are the teachers who themselves lack language proficiency, but are assigned to teach English.

After the above all discussion, it can be concluded that the role of English teachers cannot be denied using English as a medium of instruction in any context. Moreover, as suggested by Nakata, all the classroom language assessment benchmark for the professionals “should be used not as a tool for their qualification assessment but as a tool for their

professional development”²⁷. However, in Pakistani ESL context, neither the time of appointment and nor after the continuation of the professional job, the assessment of the ESL teachers have been taken. Therefore, the major emphasis of this study is to determine how IELTS test can be useful to assess ESL teacher’s language proficiency at the time of recruitment in Pakistan?

2.1 The Significance of the Study

The present study examines the effect of ESL teachers’ English proficiency on language learning of ESL students in Pakistan using IELTS as a benchmark for the assessment of their language proficiency. This study has exposed the most neglected problem that needs due attention to improve English language teaching. The results of the present study could be helpful for the ELT stakeholders in Pakistan and the academic policymakers to plan a unique course in light of the discoveries of my exploration and force a standard test to assess the level of proficiency of the ESL teachers who are supposed to teach English as a second language at any level as no language proficiency test is conducted at the time of their recruitment.

3. The Research Questions

1. To what extent, does ESL teachers’ proficiency in English affect language learning of ESL students at an intermediate level in Pakistan?
2. In what way, IELTS test can be useful to assess ESL teachers’ language proficiency at the time of their recruitment in Pakistan?

4. Research Methodology

This is an empirical research in which experimental design has been used to assess ESL teachers’ language proficiency and check its effect on language learning of ESL students at an intermediate level in Pakistan.

4.1 The Data Collection

In order to conduct this research investigation, the data has been collected from 8 language centers in Lahore city of Pakistan, conducting language proficiency course, IELTS in particular.

The data has been collected in such a way as first, the profile of 16 IELTS teachers and their IELTS certificates representing the level of English proficiency were collected. For this purpose, an IELTS qualified trainer and examiner who has more than 10 years of teaching experience was hired. After the analysis of the certificates and conducting the

interview of the teachers, 3 ESL teachers having a different level of proficiency in IELTS were selected to participate in the research.

Later, to know the effect of ESL teachers' language proficiency on language learning of ESL students, only those ESL students were selected who had passed their intermediate examinations 2015. This is done to ensure the minimum differences in the language learning proficiency of the learners. From the population (N) of 200 ESL learners of different ESL institutes in Lahore, only 60 students were selected for the purpose of the experiment.

Later, Group A, B, and C were formed from these 60 ESL students and each group is comprised of 20 ESL students. A training session for two months was arranged in the private institute. All the ESL teachers were provided with the standard syllabus given in the standardized book INSIGHT INTO IELTS.

Group A was assigned to ESL teacher who had scored band 8.0 in his IELTS, group B was assigned to ESL teacher with the IELTS band 7.0 and group C was assigned to ESL teacher with band 5.0.

At the completion of the training period a post-test of the same level of difficulty was conducted and later the result was compared to observe the impact of English language proficiency of the teachers on the learners.

4.2. The Data Analysis

The data of pre-test has been written in a table an average of the marks obtained by using simple arithmetic operations; addition, subtraction, division, percentage, and average. The data of the post-test has also been collected in the same way. The mean value of the results of pre-test and post-test has been compared for this purpose. The difference in the results of ESL learners of each group has been assessed separately. The difference of the values shows the actual gain in the proficiency of ESL students of all three groups who get training treatment for the period of two months under the same conditions in the same institute by three different ESL teachers who have differently scored in their IELTS showing different levels of their English language proficiency.

4.3. Sampling

Out of 200 IELTS students, only 60 ESL students who have the same level of English language proficiency ranging (30% to 35%) have been selected after the pre-test for this research. And only three ESL teachers having 5, 7, 8 bands in their IELTS respectively have been selected for the treatment of the selected sample.

5. The Results of the Research

The Table 1 (see Appendix A) represents the score of pre-test and post-test of three students' groups (A, B and C) respectively. The students in each group are named as A1, A2...B1, B2...C1, C2...(a pseudo name for this research). This table also shows the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the students simultaneously. Pre-test and post-test score in this table represent the overall score of all the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), however, only the percentage score is shown.

The difference in language proficiency scores of ESL students before pre-test and after post-test in Group A

Bar chart 1

The bar chart 1 shows the percentage score of pre-test and post of Group A in all the language skills. The blue bar represents the students' pre-test score which is between 30% and 33%. The red bar represents the post-test score of the students which is between 60% and 70%. The chart clearly shows that the difference between pre-test and post-test is quite significant. The average marks gained by the students of group A in their English proficiency tests have increased from 32% to 65% that seems to prove that English proficiency of ESL teacher in group A has shown significant influence on language learning of ESL students.

The difference in language proficiency scores of ESL students before pre-test and after post-test in Group B

Bar chart 2

The bar chart 2 shows the percentage score of pre-test and post-test of group B in all the language skills. The blue bar represents the students' pre-test score which is between 30% and 33%. The red bar represents the post-test score of the students which is between 50% and 59% that seems to prove that English proficiency of ESL teacher in group B has shown significant influence on language learning of ESL students. This shows that before training the students of group B secured average marks 33% in their pre-test. After the training of two months, they have got average marks 55% in the post-test proficiency test. It shows a significant effect of the course conducted by the teacher with good proficiency. ESL students in group B showed comparatively less gain in proficiency as compared to group A

The difference in language proficiency scores of ESL students before pre-test and after post-test in Group C

Bar chart 3

The bar chart 3 shows the percentage score of pretest and post of group C in all the language skills. The

blue bar represents the students' pre-test score which is between 30% and 33%. The red bar represents the post-test score of the students which is between 40% and 50% that seems to show that English proficiency of the teacher in group C has shown the significant influence on English learning of ESL students. ESL teacher of group C has band score 5.0 in the IELTS which shows that the teacher himself is not sufficiently proficient in English language. The average marks secured by the students of group C are 46. The gain in proficiency is the minimum.

Comparative proficiency improvement by the three groups (A, B and C respectively)

Bar chart 4 The results of post-test of the three groups (A, B and C)

The bar chart 4 shows the comparative improvement in students' score in the proficiency test after the training of two months conducted by different teachers having a different level of proficiency. The group A has shown the maximum improvement in the language proficiency of ESL learners. The members of group A have scored between 60% and 70% which are almost the double in the pre-test. The students of group B have shown improvement in language proficiency comparatively less than the students of group A. The marks obtained by the students of group B are between 50% and 59%. The students of group C have shown the minimum improvement in proficiency level after the treatment. The students obtained marks between 40% and 50% which is the lowest score in all the three groups.

6. The Findings & Discussion

The results obtained from the pre-test and post-tests show that there is a clear correlation between English language proficiency of ESL teachers and language learning of ESL students at an intermediate level in Pakistan. In the case where ESL teachers themselves were proficient in English and secured good score in IELTS test, ESL learners also achieved a good score in the post-test. And where ESL teachers were not sufficiently proficient and did not secure good score in their IELTS, ESL learners also showed the low result in the post-test. They did not show good performance in the post-test as supported by Karim who has shown that the major reason for the failure of the students is unqualified and non-proficient teachers.²⁸ Ball also asserts that the teachers must be proficient and have a good amount of knowledge in their relevant field in order to facilitate students' learning.²⁹ It seems to prove the relationship between the teacher's language proficiency and language learning of the students. The research findings of this study is also supported by Van den Berg quoted by De Wet who clarifies that the instructors do not have

the English capability and they don't have the knowledge and abilities to bolster English dialect learning, it all may have negative effect on the learners on the grounds that learners frequently copy their educators, whom they see as good examples.³⁰ Along these lines, the learners copy the wrong articulation, syntax, and vocabulary. As suggested by Richards, the language proficiency of the teacher can enhance his teaching skills and benefit him to control classroom discourse in order to optimize maximum learning.³¹

From the literature review, it has also been observed that in Pakistan most of the teachers use grammar translation method and have no knowledge of approaches of teaching English as a second language that has also a considerable influence on the language learning proficiency of ESL learners. For instance, the research investigations by Naseem inform about the analysis of errors made by students at a lower secondary level has shown that the errors made by the students are due to the L1 interface.³² Adalat also says that 85% teachers use Grammar Translation and are not proficient in English.³³ According to research findings of Esmail, Ahmed and Noreen "...even studying English from the primary level, the Pakistani college and university students are unable to communicate effectively in English"³⁴.

There are certain reasons for this poor achievement in English. However, the root problem is that the ESL teachers are not proficient in their English language skills. Though they have fairly gained subject knowledge as determined by the criteria of the selection that assess their English language knowledge but it does not check their proficiency. They only teach the subject knowledge of English but not the English language skills that are required to develop the proficiency of the ESL students and resultantly they show poor achievements in English. As, in Pakistani ESL context, neither the time of appointment and nor after the continuation of the professional job, the assessment of the ESL teachers have been taken. For instance, according to PEELI report conducted by British Council, the private and the government English teachers (62% of the private English teachers and 56% of government English teachers) have shown the lowest possible score in their APTIS test.³⁵ Gul & Aziz explain that listening and speaking skills of English are ignored in Pakistan because teachers themselves are lack of proficiency in these two skills as they have come from the same deficient system.³⁶ Further, this problem has also been highlighted by Faez who posts, for the most part, studies use self-report measures to assess language proficiency as these do not measure teachers' actual proficiency.³⁷ In similar kind of research investigation in Germany, König, Lammerding, Nold, Rohde1, Strauß1, and

Tachtsoglou¹ have found that there is an immense increase in research area specifically subject-specific teacher knowledge yet teachers' professional knowledge and the scientific understanding for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) is very limited.³⁸ Therefore, they propose, "to directly assess content knowledge (CK), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), and general pedagogical knowledge (GPK) of pre-service teachers for TEFL", mainly at two stages: in the start of their teacher education and at the end of their induction phase. Bernaus, Wilson, and Gardner also propose that the criteria for selection should include personal attributes and motivation to be a teacher as well as knowledge of the subject matter.³⁹

Therefore, in the light of the findings of current research and research studies conducted by Hanushek⁴⁰, Sanders & Horn⁴¹, Sanders & Rivers^{42,43}, Ferguson⁴⁴, Darling-Hammond & Youngs⁴⁵, Anna Marie Tracy⁴⁶, it can be said that the proficient teachers can have a noteworthy effect on learner's accomplishment. Moreover, it can be concluded that standardized tests can be introduced to only to check subject knowledge of the ESL teachers but also to assess their English language proficiency successfully as the research findings of the current empirical study seems to show that IELTS tests can be used as a tool for the assessment of ESL teachers' language proficiency in Pakistan. The current research implies that the government must introduce IELTS along with the assessment of the professional knowledge to measure the actual language proficiency of ESL teachers at the time of their recruitment in order to improve ESL education in Pakistan.

7. Conclusion

Through this empirical research and literature review, the present study has explored the use of IELTS as a tool for the assessment of ESL teachers' language proficiency and checked its effect on the language learning skills of ESL students at an intermediate level in Lahore city of Pakistan. The results of this empirical research reveal that the proficiency of ESL teachers affects the language learning of ESL students to a great deal in Pakistan. The first basic reason is that their English language skills are ignored completely as they copy the wrong role models. And the possible reason for the lack of the proficient ESL teachers is that the selection criteria for the recruitment of the ESL teachers are improper as they are not selected on the basis of their language proficiency in English rather they are selected on the basis of their professional qualification. That assists them how to teach but does not make them proficient in the language. Therefore, the current study posits

that the selection of English teachers should not only be determined by their professional qualifications but also with the levels of their proficiency in English. This will promote English as the medium of instruction in the classroom that ultimately helps the students to develop their proficiency in English. Therefore, the current research implies that government must upgrade the selection criteria of the ESL teachers and English proficiency tests should be conducted so that only proficient ESL teachers may allow for ESL teaching. Moreover, the examination of English should be changed to English proficiency measuring tests so that ESL teachers may focus on the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) rather than just only the subject knowledge.

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