

The Causes of English Language and Literature Students' Poor English Skills at Kandahar University

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Abstract: It is expected from under graduate students of English Language and Literature Department to have an acceptable level of accuracy and fluency in language skills in order to successfully complete this field, but majority of students are facing with many problems in language skills. Most of the students are weak in speaking, and are not able to express their views to talk about a topic continuously for few minutes. In addition to that, problems are seen in their pronunciation and grammar. They have serious spelling problems and are unable to write correctly. The purpose of this study was to discover the causes of English Language & Literature students' poor English language skills at Kandahar University. Hundred Students were selected through the use of systematic random sampling method. This was a descriptive research in which two questionnaires were developed to collect the data from the students and lecturers. The data was analyzed by using IBM 23 version of SPSS and found out the frequency and percentage. The findings showed; Language Differences, lack of effective material, nonprofessional teachers were the reasons of poor English language skills of this research in the context of Kandahar University. The findings also showed the main problem was at pre-university; unprofessional teachers, inappropriate curriculums, lack of materials & tools and lack of students' interest. The problems were not only existed at school years which caused students' poor English language Skills, the results also indicated that the ratio between teachers and students was not standard at university level in which adversely effected the quality teaching. These problems raise due to exclusion of English in Kankor exam (entry test for universities), inappropriate curriculum at both departments and lack of educational materials and other factors that limit students' English language skills improvement.

Keywords: Language skills, Literature, Faculty of Education, curriculum, realia.

1. INTRODUCTION:

When we learn our native language, we initially learn to listen, then to speak, then to read, and finally to write. These are four language skills. We all carry these four aspects of language throughout our life and as we live, we put continuous efforts in order to strengthen the way we listen, speak, read and write. Not just in acquiring our mother tongue, but these four are called as the four important language skills that are necessary if you acquire and learn any language particularly if you study English language and literature, together they function as four pillars of a language.

After 2001 with establishment of the new government in Afghanistan a huge influx of international forces (NATO) and American troops, English language got a special attention in Afghanistan. English language has a special place and it is being taught from grade 4th -12th in all schools across the country. In addition, many private language institutes have been providing English language courses for people. English language Department as part of Education Faculty and also Faculty of Languages and Literature have been providing Bachelor degrees in universities across the country. Although learning English language opens a new window for the Afghan learners, but it should be mentioned that it's not quite easy and everyone has to deal with many challenges in the process of acquiring language and almost everywhere in the world ESL/EFL learners and their instructors face with some sort of difficulties in the process of learning and teaching English language.

It is expected from under graduate students of English Language and Literature Department of Education Faculty in Kandahar University to have an acceptable level of accuracy and fluency in language skills in order to successfully complete this field, but unfortunately majority of students are facing many problems in language skill. Most of the students are weak in speaking, not able to express their views and are unable to talk about a topic continuously for few minutes. In addition to that, problems can be seen in their pronunciation and grammar. They have serious spelling problems and inability to write correctly. The problems with reading and listening seem bigger than other skills.

Unfortunately, we can hardly find a student who can read a passage or paragraph fluently and accurately and listening is the weakest when they are asked to summarize native speakers' dialogues or lectures. These problems were existed from time of their admission and there was hope for the improvement yet there is nothing much changed. Among students only few of them have been able to fulfill some of the expectations that one can have from students with such background of English language and literature. Majority of them still take the failure after graduation and will only add to the number of low-skilled graduates who are unable to get jobs that are related to their field of study or to bring any positive or effective change as they're expected.

In spite of all the researches that have taken place in the other parts of the world so far in this field of study, we still see a need to conduct a research at Kandahar University for two reasons; first, because such studies have not taken place here yet and secondly, because the previous studies have been conducted in those countries that are either countries with mostly native language speakers or because they have different educational systems, cultures and better resources compared to this region.

In case this problem is ignored, we'll see that such weakness will continue to cause many difficulties and headaches for both students and lecturers. As a result, the number of those who fail in their learning process will increase, it'll cause a flow of low skilled graduates in the discussed field of study and eventually our graduates won't be able to play a competitive role in the market.

This research will benefit students' enrolling in English department to understand causes of poor language skills and would be able to take action on the spot to fulfill their weakness with help of their teachers. In addition to that, it will help faculties at English departments to consider challenges of students' poor language skills while designing or developing curriculums, however it will help policy makers at ministry of Higher education/ ministry of education and other interested organization in this issue.

The purpose of this study is to discover the causes of English Language & Literature students' poor English language skills at Kandahar University.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Focusing on EFL learners with Chinese language backgrounds, Goh (2000) investigated listening comprehension problems of students in college EFL studies. Findings included ten listening comprehension problems in relation to three cognitive processing phases—perceptions (maintaining attention to spoken input), parsing (encoding the input to establish a meaningful representation in short-term memory), and utilization (using the background knowledge to interpret the input for storage). First, in the perception stage, learners reported most difficulties as: “do not recognize words they know,” “neglect the next part when thinking about meaning,” “cannot chunk streams of speech,” “miss the beginning of texts,” and “concentrate too hard or unable to concentrate.” Second, in the parsing stage, Goh (2000) found that listeners complained of problems such as “quickly forget what is heard,” “unable to form a mental representation from words heard,” and “do not understand subsequent parts of input because of earlier problems.” Third, in the utilization stage, “understand the words but not the intended message” and “confused about the key ideas in the message” were often mentioned.

In Australia, Robertson et al. (2000) explored the difficulties experienced by international students studying at one Australian university. The researchers surveyed both international student and local staff perceptions of those difficulties. Staff and students emphasized language as a key source of difficulties in teaching and learning. The students marked a lack of confidence with English. They had incomplete understanding of lecturers' spoken English, and felt unhappy with their oral performances in the presence of Australian classmates. There were also concerns about colloquial language, writing difficulties, and problems of interpretation. He concluded that language issues were the major area of unsolved problems facing international students. Bretag et al. (2002) in their research found that according to academic staff, international students from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB students) were unable to contribute effectively, as required, in tutorial discussion; and that due to poor grammar their written work was often hard to read and to assess. Many international students had difficulties with writing. International students have highly variable levels of English proficiency. If an international student does experience problems, it is most likely to be in the first and second years of their courses, particularly with their written work (Bayley et al, 2002, p. 47).

Wong (2004) interviewed international students and he found that many international students are accustomed to a didactic and teacher-centered environment with less classroom conversation, it made difficult in Australia to make the transition from passive learning to active learning. At the same time, his study found that the students acknowledged that their lack of English language proficiency in the classroom exacerbated by cultural barriers was a principal source of learning difficulties. Hellsten and Prescott (2004) also investigated factors affecting international students' learning, and reported on language difficulties experienced by them. They found that feeling inadequate in spoken English hindered many Asian international students from participating in classroom discussion.

In the United States, which has one of the biggest populations in terms of English language speakers, the schools and institutes in different parts of the country are hosting people from different cultures and languages. The huge influx of immigrants from almost all countries of the world and their difficulty to melt in American society and to learn English has been a big challenge for the country and especially for its educational institutes. The poor result of ESL learners in

California schools compelled Patricia and her colleague in 2005 to take a close look at the challenges that the teachers had in terms of non-native speakers and learners in the schools. They found that the teachers were doing their best and not blaming the students, while inability to contact with the parents of the children due to different L2s, lack of time to teach English and other subjects, various levels of skills among students, inability to communicate with the students due to social, cultural and personal issues. They also found Lack of appropriate tools and materials and less attention paid by state and federal authorities. Finally, inability of students to have pre-school skills were the challenges that the teachers were faced during their instructions.

Palmer et al. (2007) examined the factors that affected a nine-year-old Palestinian ESL student, in acquiring English as a second language. Which is the case for many ESL students in US schools. He was pulled out with other English language learners for two hours each day to receive support in language skills from the ESL teacher. His ESL teacher reported that he faced difficulties in decoding English words with three or four phonemes and had poor spelling and writing. He was assessed in both of his languages, which led the researchers to suggest that his Arabic reading skills were not sufficient enough to support him making transfers to his second language, or L2. They also found that Arabic and English share some positive and negative transfers that may ease or hinder the language acquisition of the learner. The alphabetic systems and verb tenses are similar in both languages it is a positive transfer. However, the researchers noted that many differences can be found between the two languages that lead to negative transfers as English is written from left to right, whereas Arabic is written from right to left.

Al-Khresheh (2010) examined the interference of Arabic syntactic structures on English syntactic structures in Jordanian EFL students. The participants were 115 grade 10th EFL students. His findings indicated that Arabic-speaking EFL students have difficulty in the word order used in simple English sentence structure. The study also showed that Arab students were affected by their use of standard and non-standard Arabic in the transfer process.

English language learners mainly focusing on the negative transfers that challenged students. The study included five EFL Teachers and six students and took place in one elementary and one secondary school for a three-Week period. They found that negative and positive Transfers affect the language acquisition of the students. Challenges included that Arabic is written opposite of English from right to Left and that English graph phonemic rules are irregular, whereas these rules in Arabic are not. In order to overcome these challenges, the students may need to practice second language frequently (Abdo & Breen, 2010).

Based on the points mentioned above, phonetic, morphemic and function differences between English language and other language systems, differences in culture, customs and lack of language materials and also lack of professional teachers are the most common challenges that the ESL/EFL students and their instructors are facing in classes that cause lack of language skill.

2.1 Research Objectives

- To find out EFL lecturers' level of satisfaction about their students' English language skills and the challenges that limit the effectiveness of their instructions.
- To discover the reason(s) that limited EFL students' English language skills improvement at pre-university level.
- To discover the challenges that limit EFL students' English language skills improvement at the university level.

2.2 Research Questions

1. What is the level of EFL lecturers' satisfaction about their students' English language skills and what are the challenges that limit the effectiveness of their instructions?
2. What was/were the reason (s) that limited EFL students' English language skills improvement at pre-university level?
3. What are the challenges that limit EFL students' English language skills improvement at the university level?

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS:

Filed of research: Kandahar University

Population: Students and lecturers of English Language and literature Departments at Education Faculty and Faculty of Languages and Literature - Kandahar University.

Sample Size: 100 students (freshmen, sophomore, junior & senior) from Pre-service, in-service and Night -shifts and 6 lecturers (3 from each faculty).

Sampling Method: 20% (100) of English Departments' students from both faculties (50 from each) were selected through a systematic random sampling method. Since the importance and impacts of the problem (poor English language skills) increase in every higher level, therefore; the number of samples were as following: 10% of freshmen, 20% sophomore, 30% of junior and 40% of senior students.

Research Design and Instrument: This research is descriptive research in which two questionnaires were developed to collect the data from the students and lecturers.

Data Analysis: The data was analyzed by using IBM 23 version of SPSS and found out the frequency and percentage of the respondent

4. RESULTS:

The finding shows perspectives of teachers’ satisfaction in the four language skills of students, views about the main reasons of English language and literature (EFL) students’ poor language skills, and the challenges that limit the effectiveness of teachers ‘instructions to improve student’s English language skills. In addition, it also contained the responses of EFL students concerning their English language skills, related causes and challenges that they’ve faced both in pre-university level/high school and in university level as the students of English language and literature field.

Table:1.1 Students English Background and Satisfaction

No.	Items	Yes		No	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1.	Students studied English before entering university	95	95.0	5	5.0
2.	Students had professional English teachers at high schools	26	26.0	74	74.0
3.	Students took private English classes	85	85.0	15	15.0
4.	Teacher(s) used specific method and material to improve their language skills in schools	58	58.0	42	42.0
5.	Teacher at university use specific methods to improve students’ language skills.	56	56.0	44	44.0

Table:1.1 Shows the responses of the students with yes and no. among 100 students 95% of them have responded with yes while we asked them whether they had studied English before joining English department and 5% said No, because these students might be from those remote areas who did not have any English teacher. In the answer to the question whether they had professional English teachers during high school or not 26% said yes, and the 74% responded with No. In answer to the question whether they have taken private English classes or not 85% students said they have taken private English courses and 15% said they didn’t take private English courses. Students who said their teachers used specific methods and materials for improving their language skills are 58% and 42% reported that their teachers were not using specific methods and materials for improving their language skills. In response of the English teacher at university used specific methods to improve students’ language skills, 56% students were saying that their teachers in university are using specific methods and materials for improving language skills of students but 44% have said no to this question. As the number of respondents in this study were hounded the frequency and percentage are the same.

Table 1.2 The Most Focused Aspect of Teachers’ Instruction

	Frequency	Percent
More theoretical parts and less attention to practical aspect	74	74.0
More practical and less attention to theoretical aspect	26	26.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.2 Shows the most focused aspect in teacher instruction at high school theoretical and practical, which 74% of respondent reported that their teachers’ instruction covered more theoretical parts and less attention was given to practical aspect, on the other hand 26% of respondents reported the opposite their teachers focused More practical and less attention to theoretical aspect.

Table 1.3 Reason for Selecting English Department for their under graduate

	Frequency	Percent
My favorite field	63	63.0
My parents/friends suggested	9	9.0
I thought it was easier than other departments	12	12.0
It was an accident	16	16.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.3 Shows students’ purpose for selecting English Languages and Literature Department for their undergraduate study. 63% students selected English department because it was their favorite, 9% of them selected because of their parent’s and friend’s’ motivation, 12% thought it would be easy then other disciplines and 16% have come to English department accidentally.

Table 1.4 Students Entering English Department Should Have Sufficient English Languages Skills

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	46	46.0
Agree	50	50.0
Disagree	2	2.0

Strongly disagree	2	2.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.4 shows the opinions of students on whether it's important for anyone who first enter English department should have sufficient English language skills. 46% strongly agreed, 50% Agreed, 2% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed with this idea.

	Frequency	Percent
Speaking	44	44.0
Reading	8	8.0
Writing	12	12.0
Listening	36	36.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.5 Shows that 44 % students had challenges in speaking skills, 36% in listening, 12 % in writing and 8% in reading while entering university.

	Frequency	Percent
lack of professional teachers	36	36.0
inappropriate curriculum	11	11.0
lack of effective teaching and learning materials	14	14.0
lack of my own interest	5	5.0
Difference between Language one(1) and target langue (L2)	9	9.0
lack of professional teachers, inappropriate curriculum and lack of effective teaching and learning materials	2	2.0
inappropriate Curriculum and lack of my own interest	7	7.0
lack of professional teachers and inappropriate curriculum	4	4.0
lack of professional teachers and lack of effective teaching and learning materials	2	2.0
All	10	10.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.6 Shows the causes of weakness they had while entering university. For 36% of students the cause of weakness was they didn't have professional teachers in high school, 11% said they had inappropriate curriculum, 14% said there was lack of effective teaching and learning materials at that time, 5% said they were not interested in English at that time, for 9% of them the cause of such weakness was the differences existed in their native language and English language, for 2% of them causes for such weakness were lack of professional teachers, inappropriate curriculum and lack of effective teaching and learning materials, 7% said there was inappropriate Curriculum and lack of their own interest, 4% have reported that there was lack of professional teachers and inappropriate curriculum, for 2% of them the cause of these weakness were lack of professional teachers and lack of effective teaching and learning materials and 10% of them the causes such weakness were all not single cause they had these weakness because they did not have professional teachers, they had inappropriate curriculum they didn't have effective teaching and learning materials, they were not interested in English language, their native language and English language were different from each other during high school.

	Frequency	Percent
Very effective	16	16.0
Effective	27	27.0
Little effective	11	11.0
Ineffective	2	2.0
Missing System	44	44.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.7: Shows that students rate the methods and materials used by teachers at university classes to improve their language skills. Students rate 16% methods and materials is very effective, 27% rate it effective, 11 % little effective and 2% of them said methods and materials using in class are ineffective for improving language skills of students. As this question was related to the question do your teachers at university use specific methods and materials

to improve your language skills with their responses of yes and no which is discussed in table 1.1 students who selected no they are not furtherly probed for this question, so that’s why the 44% in Table 1.7 is missing responses.

	Frequency	Percent
Speaking	10	10.0
Reading	6	6.0
Writing	7	7.0
Listening	5	5.0
None	8	8.0
Reading and speaking	1	1.0
All	63	63.0
Total	100	100.0

Table1.9 In answer to the question that your current curriculum is mostly support which skills, 10% of students said their current curriculum is mostly support speaking, 6% said it supports reading, 7% of them claimed it supports its listening, 8% of them said it support none of them, 1% said it supports reading and speaking, however 63% of them said it supports all four skills of language including listening, speaking, reading and writing.

	Frequency	Percent
Speaking	38	38.0
Reading	7	7.0
Writing	15	15.0
Listening	38	38.0
Reading and listening	2	2.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.10 show that 38% of students still have problem in speaking, 7% of them reported that they have problem in reading,15% said they have problem in writing, 38% said they have problem in listening skill and 2 % said they still have problems in reading and listening skills.

	Frequency	Percent
Difference between L1 and L2	5	5.0
Lack of effective materials	22	22.0
High Number of students in class	5	5.0
Inappropriate curriculum	13	13.0
unsuitable teaching methods	10	10.0
lack of my own interest	11	11.0
Difference between L1 and L2 and high No of students in class	6	6.0
Difference between L1 and L2 and unsuitable teaching methods	5	5.0
Unsuitable curriculum and inappropriate teaching methods	4	4.0
All	19	19.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1.11 Shows that 5% stated that because of the differences existed between L1 and L2, 22% of them said because there is no effective materials, 5% of them said because of high Number of students in class, 13% of them said because of inappropriate curriculum, 10% of them believed their teacher use unsuitable teaching methods, 11% of them are not interested themselves, for 6% of them there is difference between L1 and L2 and high number of students in class, 5% of them think they have difference between L1 and L2 and unsuitable teaching methods, 4% of them have unsuitable curriculum and their teaching use inappropriate teaching methods and for 19% of them all are the challenge that limit their improvement of language skills.

Teachers’ Result

	Frequency	Percent
Satisfied	1	16.7
little satisfied	5	83.3

Very satisfied	0	0
Not satisfied	0	0
Total	6	100.0

Table 2.1 shows that 83.3% of teachers are little satisfied from their students and only 16.7% were satisfied from the current language skills of their students.

	Frequency	Percent
Lack of professional teachers in schools	3	50.0
Non-standard text books of schools	1	16.7
Different between L1 & L2	0	0
All	2	33.3
Total	6	100.0

Table 2.2 Shows the teachers 50.0 % who thought students' poor language skills is due to lack of professional teachers and 16.7 % who thought poor language skills is due to non-standard text books in schools, in addition 33.3% believed these are all the main causes for poor language skills of the students.

	Frequency	Percent
Speaking	5	83.3
Writing	1	16.7
Reading	0	0
Listening	0	0
Total	6	100.0

Table 2.3: Teachers who believed their students have most difficulty in speaking are 83.3 % and 16.7% of them believed their students have most difficulty in writing.

	Frequency	Percent
Writing	1	16.7
Speaking	0	0
Reading	0	0
Listening	0	0
All	5	83.3
Total	6	100.0

Table 2.4 Shows 16.7% of the teachers believed that their curriculum mainly supports writing skills while 83.3% believed their curriculum support all four language skills.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
High number of students in class	2	33.3	33.3
Difference between L1& L2	0	0	0
Lack of effective realia	0	0	0
Inappropriate curriculum	0	0	0
Not have enough time for preparation	0	0	
All	4	66.7	66.7
Total	6	100.0	100.0

Table 2.5 Shows 33.3% teachers believed high number of students in classes are challenges that limit their Effectiveness of Teacher Instructions to Improve Students Language Skills and the 66.7% of them believe due to the high number of courses teaching leads us to not having enough time for preparation, inappropriate curriculum, high number of students in classes, Difference existed between L1& L2 of the students and lack of effective realia are all the challenges, which limit the effectiveness of the teachers' instruction for improving the language skills of the students in EFL classes.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

The findings show purpose of choosing English language and literature indicate that 63% of the students have come to this field because of their own interest. However, the rest percentage indicate that they were externally motivated or came accidentally to this department. Their reasons seem to be as a result of their unawareness and misunderstanding of this field. One of the prominent misunderstandings which can be inferred from their responses is that they thought they'd study this field just to improve their English language skills. They were not expected to face with a load of courses that require enough skills which they should have gained during school years. Unfortunately, Concern Departments such as the Ministry of Higher Education have failed to spread enough knowledge and information about the qualities of EFL field and its requirements for having enough language skills each student must have if he/she decides to study English language and literature department.

Moreover, 74% students reported that they did not have professional teachers at their schools; likewise, 50% teachers had the same concerns. This finding indicate that the Ministry of Education is responsible for such failures. They should assure that students in public schools have access to professional English teachers, standard curriculum and effective materials in order to equip students with enough English language skills. Based on result, most of public schools even do not provide students with basic knowledge of English language the result shows even 5% of students didn't study English before coming to university, though the English course is included in schools' curriculums from grade 4th -12th. It confirmed that there are still some schools that do not have English teachers yet. That's why students take extra English courses in private centers, where they start learning the language from the very beginning (Alphabets), while English subject is one of the main courses. It should be mentioned that most of private English courses are also failed to provide their students with quality education.

In addition to that, result shows students while entering English departments have most problem in speaking 44% and 36% in listening. It creates headache for both students and lecturers, because ELL departments have goals and objectives that are beyond English language skills teaching, and the ELL lecturers have to teach subjects that need enough English language skills, while most of the students do not have them. On the other hand, there is a limited number of teachers of English for a huge number of students and this challenge, which makes it even more challenging for lecturers in quality teaching. An inappropriate curriculum and lack of educational materials also add to this problem. The result shows that students' skill improved in speaking from students' perspective but 83 % teachers believed their students have still had problems in speaking. The students' responses indicate their language skills in listening and the writing is vice versa. Though the students replied that curriculums at universities support their language skills. Teachers 83.3% little satisfied from their students' language skills improvement.

Patrica and his colleagues in 2005 found that lack appropriate tools and materials limit the effectiveness of language skills transfers which our research also conformed the same issues. The differences between Arabic and English has positive and negative transfers. These transfers are found in alphabetical system, verb tenses as positive transfer; pronunciation and writing English from left to right and Arabic from right to left as negative transfer (Palmer et al, 2007; Alkhresha 2010 and Abdo and Breen 2010). These positive and negative transfers can be seen in Pashto and Dari languages as well and most of our students are native speakers of these two languages.

All of the above mentioned points result in an influx of low quality EFL graduates who are unable to serve their society and compete in the market. They join the other low-skilled group of graduates and the time and resources that are put in for a positive change do not give the expected outcomes. Last but not least, the findings of this research (Language Differences, lack of effective material, nonprofessional teachers) are the reasons of poor English language skills in the context of Kandahar University.

Based on the findings of this study, students' lack of English language skills required for this field is the main reason that has created most of the problem. It discovered that the main problem is raising from pre-university at school levels, because of unprofessional teachers, inappropriate curriculums lack of materials and tools and lack of their own interest. This problem exists due to exclusion of English in Kankor exam (entry test for universities) in addition to this, students who enter this field of study should already have improved their language skills in high schools. When students have problems in basic level with low background enter to English department, so it's very difficult to cope out at higher level.

Beside problems existed for students at schools' years for causing their poor English language, the ratio between teachers and students are not standard at university level which reduced the effectiveness of quality teaching. Inappropriate curriculum at both departments and lack of educational materials are the other factors that limit students' English language skills improvement.

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