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The Nature of Difficulties in Learning English by the students at Secondary School level in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study was a comparative investigation into the nature of difficulties in learning English by the secondary school students of Provincial and Federal government schools in N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa). The objectives of the study were (1)To find out the level of difficulties of secondary school students of Provincial and Federal government schools of N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa) in tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, construction of sentences and reading with comprehension and (2)To compare the level of difficulties in learning English as a second language at secondary level of Provincial and Federal government schools in N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa). The sample of the study was comprised of 654 randomly selected students from twenty four Provincial government schools and twenty two Federal government schools located in twenty four districts of N.W.F.P. (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa). An English language achievement test for secondary classes was administered to the sample students of the study. The data obtained were tabulated and analyzed through SPSS 17.0 software to compute mean, standard deviation, t-value and p-value (significance) level. The main findings of the study were; the students of Provincial government schools faced more difficulties in learning of verb forms, narration, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, sentence arrangements and reading comprehension. The students of both types of schools systems faced same difficulties in learning voices.

Key words: Nature of Difficulties, Tenses, Voices, Narrations, Conjunctions, Prepositions, Articles.

1. Introduction

The modern world is a global village and the communities of the world are getting closer to each other. Through language different people and communities share their ideas and concepts. As Lyytinen (1985) pointed out, "man uses language to express feelings and attitudes and to establish, coordinate, and control relationship with others".

In the result of these interactions the majority of the nations of the world are becoming bilingual. As Smith (1994) pointed, "The majority of the people in this globe can call themselves speaker of at least two languages". According to Brown (2000) becoming bilingual is a way of life. Every bone and fiber of your being is affected in some way as you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

In the context of present day situation, it is difficult for a nation to live in isolation, divorced from the humanity as no country can afford to rely on its domestic store of knowledge alone.

As Mueen (1992) argued that “English meets the test of practical value. It is the language of the world in all fields of the arts, hard science, humanities and social science. International trade, commerce and diplomacy are conducted in English.” Due to its importance as international language, English has got a privileged position as a second compulsory language in Pakistan. English is taught as a compulsory subject at different levels mostly from class I to B.A/B.Sc.

According to the National Curriculum for English language, Grade I-XII, (Government of Pakistan, 2006), English is the language of international communication, higher learning and better career options. It should therefore reach the masses so that there is no discrimination among the rich and poor in Pakistan in term of opportunities for personal, professional and economic development.

In the teaching of modern languages, the linguist deals with learner’s errors with curiosity. To Corder (1967), “the application of linguistic and psychological theories to the study of language learning added a new dimension to the discussion of errors.”

Learning a language is a difficult task and children make mistakes while learning a language. To Maicusi (2000), “Making errors is the natural thing in the world and it is evidently attached to human beings.....it is necessary part of learning and teacher should use the errors with the view of having better result in the classroom”. This indicates that second language teacher should be experience and enough qualified to use the learner’s errors for learning process.

Moreover, teaching of English is an extra ordinary complex task. All who know English cannot teach it well so it is imperative for the teachers of English to improve the teaching by knowing the learning difficulties and factors affecting the learning of the students in English on the basis of errors done by them. As Winkler (2008) pointed out “Mistakes tells us more about what children understand about language than the correct things that they say.

This study was a comparative investigation into the nature of difficulties and factors affecting the learning of English by the secondary school students of Provincial and Federal Government Schools in N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa).The difficulties of the students in such matters as tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, arrangement of sentences and reading with comprehension were identified and the comparison of these difficulties were made.

Much of the research conducted regarding second language learning of acquisition focused on adult second language (Gass, 2001). Ramiraz, (1992) and Wong-Fillmore (1991) pointed out that the researchers who are interested in school students of English learner usually focus on the elementary grades students.

The area regarding the second language learning in secondary school has been ignored. This study will provide a base for the research in teaching English as a second language in secondary level in Pakistan.

2. Objectives of the Study

- Following were the objectives of the study:
- To find out the level of difficulties of secondary school students of Provincial and Federal government schools of N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa) in tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, Articles, construction of sentences and reading with comprehension;
 - To compare the level of difficulties in learning English at secondary level of Provincial and Federal government schools in N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa)

3. Research Methodology

The population of the study was comprised of all the class X students and English teachers of twenty four Provincial Government schools and twenty two Federal Government Schools located in twenty four districts of N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa).

The sample of the study was representative of eight Provincial government Schools and eight Federal government schools of district Abbottabad, Haripur, Kohat, Mansehra, Malakand, Mardan, Noshehra and Peshawar comprising of 654 randomly selected students of class X.

4. Research Instrument

English language Achievement test was developed by the researcher in accordance with the objectives of teaching English as a second language and English curriculum for secondary classes to find out the difficulties in learning English by the secondary school students of provincial and Federal government schools in N.W.F.P (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa)

The test was comprised of Eighty eight items divided into eight sections to test different aspects of English language such as tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, arrangement of sentences and reading with comprehension.

The preliminary test was first judged by a team of experts (judges) from Foundation University College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Rawalpindi and some experienced English teacher of secondary level of N.W.F.P (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).

Pilot testing of the study was carried out to validate the instrument.

In order to collect data from the respondents through the final instrument the researcher visited the sample schools personally. The final test was personally administered to the sample of 654 students with the help of research assistant for data collection.

Through systematic quantitative description of the answer books, the errors was identified, counted in frequencies and classified under the categories of errors in tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, construction of sentences and reading with comprehension.

The data obtained were tabulated and analyzed to compute Mean, Standard deviation, t-value and p-value (significance) level. The data collected were analyzed through SPSS 17.0 software. t-test was applied to measure the significance of difference between the means of both types of school systems. Significance was seen at .01 levels

5. Discussion

This study was conducted to examine the nature of difficulties and factors affecting the learning of English by the secondary school students of Provincial and Federal government schools in N.W.F.P. (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa). The main findings of the study were; the students of provincial government schools faced more difficulties in learning of verb forms, narration, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, sentence arrangements and reading comprehension. There is strong evidence from the findings of the study that the students of Provincial government schools face more difficulties as compare to the students of Federal government schools in learning of English.

The findings of the study that students of Provincial government school committed more errors as compare to Federal government schools in the leaning of tenses and active and passive voices, these findings was supported by Khansir (2008). His study on the systematic error in English by Indian undergraduate students revealed that "out of 1678 errors made in the use of sentences, 648 (39%) were observed in tenses and 476 (28%) were observed in voices." The finding of the study regarding verb error was also supported by Naseem (2007). Her findings show that errors of verb were the second highest category of errors committed by matric students. Her findings revealed that out of 792 errors 111 (14 %) were observed in verbs. She explains that English verb is a learning difficulty for all students at secondary level in Pakistan.

The finding of the study that students of Provincial government school committed more errors as compare to the students of Federal government schools in the leaning of prepositions was supported by Li (2005). His study on the collocational errors types in ESL/EFL college learner's writing revealed that most participants

had difficulty in preposition and lack collocational competence in using preposition. This finding was also supported by Cele (2001). She observed that non native speakers of English tend to have three types of errors with prepositions: choosing the wrong preposition, omitting a needed preposition and using an extra preposition where one is not needed. However, onike (2007) observed that “The overall students’ performance in the use of preposition was rated good and this indicate students good knowledge of prepositional rules.

The finding of the study that students of Provincial government school committed more errors as compare to Federal government schools in the leaning of article was supported by Bryant (1984). He observed that “errors of articles were frequently encountered especially among Asian and Slavic students”. This finding was also supported by Kimizuka (1967). He observed that article usage is one of the greatest problems for the Japanese learner is vividly revealed in the high frequency of mistakes, the highest of all the structural items.

The finding of the study that the students of Federal government schools committed less error and showed significantly better performance than the students of Provincial government schools in comprehension is because the prevailing examination system tends to test mostly students memory rather than their comprehension of topic. This finding was supported by Karim (2006). She observed that only 16% students responded that their comprehension of the topic is assessed frequently, 34% responded not frequently and 50% responded that it is not assessed.

The researches conducted on the learning difficulties of students by Westwood (2006), Farkota (2005), Kershner (2000), reported that learning difficulties of the students are not due the lack of innate or cognitive abilities, perceptual impairment, and learning disability, deficiencies in memory or poor motivation. The learning difficulties of students are directly related to the nature of curriculum or methods of teaching.

The findings of the present study indicate that the current scene regarding English language teaching for secondary classes call for special measure to be taken. There are a numbers of problems in English language teaching, particularly in government schools of N.W.F.P. (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa).

These problems of English language teaching exist since independence. These problems create hindrance and difficulties in learning of English at the school level.

The findings of this study indicate that the condition of learning English at secondary level in N.W.F.P. (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa) is worse and there is a need to address these problems on priority bases especially in the Provincial government schools of N.W.F.P. (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa).

6. Conclusions

In the light of the statistical analysis and findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

It was concluded that the students of Federal government schools showed significantly better performance than the students of Provincial government schools in learning English at secondary level.

It was concluded that the students of Federal government schools committed less error and showed significantly better performance than the students of Provincial government schools in tenses, narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles and comprehension.

7. Recommendations

In the light of the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, construction of sentences and reading with comprehension should be taught systematically to the students of provincial government schools.
- The teacher should improve their teaching technique by preparing systematic material.

- The learning of Tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, construction of sentences and reading with comprehension should be sufficiently re-inforced.
- The English teachers may provide maximum time to the students for teaching of grammar particularly to verb forms, Active and passive voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, sentence arrangement and reading comprehension.
- The ministry of education should arrange in-service training and refresher courses regularly for English teachers.

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Table 1. The overall English language achievements of the boys of Federal and Provincial government schools.

Variable	t	p	F.G				P.G
			N=306		N=348		
			M	S.D	M	S.D	
English language achievement test	32.75		9.66	26.84	9.99	7.66	.000*
Tenses		11.41		5.11	13.34	5.02	4.85
.000*							
Voices		3.69		1.56	3.95	1.33	2.29
.022**							
Narrations		2.57		0.97	2.93	1.04	4.59
.000*							
Conjunctions		4.28		2.03	5.12	1.99	5.30
.000*							
Prepositions		1.75		1.39	2.22	1.45	4.11
.000*							
Articles		1.10		1.21	1.85	1.23	7.87
.000*							
Sentences		0.97		1.00	1.61	1.75	5.62
.000*							
arrangements							
Comprehension		1.47		1.19	2.14	1.26	6.89
.000*							

*P<.01

df = 652

**P>.01

Table reflects the numbers of students of Federal and Provincial government Schools are 306 and 348 respectively. The table shows the mean and standard deviation of the students of Federal Government schools on the measure of English language achievement test, tenses, active and passives voices, direct and indirect narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, arrangement of sentences and reading with comprehension. The table also shows t and p value of both groups.

The table shows that the students of Federal government schools committed less error and showed significantly better performance than the students of Provincial government schools in tenses, narrations, conjunctions, prepositions, articles and comprehension. However, both type of school system showed same performance in voices.

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