

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: KEY CHALLENGES
AND INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHESShazia Aftab¹, Sakina Bibi², Usman khan^{*3}^{1,2, *3}Department of English, University of Mardan, Mardan, Pakistan¹Shaziaaftab311@gmail.com, ^{*3}noorusman1995@gmail.com**Keywords**ESL Teaching; Teacher Training;
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Abstract

This study explores the challenges and strategies in teaching English as a second language (ESL) at the secondary level, considering both teacher and student perspectives. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations in selected schools. Findings reveal persistent challenges, including limited teacher training, outdated instructional practices, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, learner anxiety, and socio-cultural barriers. Despite these constraints, teachers often adopt innovative, low-cost strategies and adapt communicative approaches to their contexts. The study also highlights disparities in technology access and the role of community attitudes in shaping learning outcomes. Learner motivation emerged as closely tied to classroom support and future aspirations. The results suggest that effective ESL instruction requires learner-centered pedagogy, ongoing teacher development, and inclusive educational policies. This research contributes practical insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers working to improve English language teaching in multilingual and resource-limited environments.

INTRODUCTION

The global status of English as a lingua franca has significantly influenced educational systems worldwide, compelling non-native English-speaking countries to incorporate English language instruction into their national curricula. As English increasingly becomes essential for academic success, employment opportunities, and global communication, the demand for effective teaching practices has intensified. Particularly in multilingual and multicultural settings, teaching English as a Secondary Language (ESL) presents a complex array of challenges for educators. These challenges range from linguistic and pedagogical difficulties to socio-cultural and institutional barriers (Alam, 2023). The process of acquiring a second language, especially in formal classroom settings, involves more than rote

memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary; it demands effective strategies that address the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. In many non-English-speaking regions, students begin learning English at the secondary level, often after developing proficiency in their native or regional languages. This delayed introduction can lead to difficulties in pronunciation, comprehension, fluency, and retention (Cohen, 2014).

Furthermore, students may exhibit resistance or anxiety towards learning English due to unfamiliarity or a lack of confidence in their abilities. Such psychological barriers can significantly hinder their motivation and performance. Teachers, therefore, must adopt approaches that are sensitive to learners'

cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and previous language experiences. Research suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy and student-centered learning environments enhance student engagement and improve second language acquisition outcomes. Another significant challenge lies in the lack of resources and training available to ESL teachers,

particularly in underdeveloped or rural educational settings. Many instructors are inadequately trained to handle the intricacies of teaching a foreign language, especially one as complex as English (Al-Wossabi, 2024). Traditional teaching methods—such as grammar translation or rote repetition—are still prevalent in many classrooms, limiting students' communicative competence. These methods often fail to develop the four key language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—in an integrated and practical manner. In contrast, modern communicative language teaching (CLT) emphasizes interaction, real-life communication, and learner autonomy, all of which are critical in facilitating effective language learning. However, implementing CLT requires adequate teacher training, suitable teaching materials, and supportive administrative policies, all of which are frequently absent in resource-constrained environments. Socioeconomic disparities further exacerbate the situation. Students from low-income backgrounds may not have access to quality language instruction, learning aids, or supplementary support such as private tutoring or digital resources (Showell et al. 2025).

Moreover, English is often perceived as a language of privilege, leading to identity conflicts among learners who may feel alienated from their linguistic heritage. This phenomenon, termed “linguistic imperialism,” raises important ethical questions about the role of English in education and society. Teachers must therefore strike a balance between promoting English proficiency and respecting students' native languages and cultures. Despite these challenges, numerous strategies have proven effective in enhancing ESL instruction. Differentiated instruction, which tailors teaching methods to accommodate diverse learner needs, has gained popularity among ESL practitioners. Task-based learning, project-based approaches, and the use of

technology—such as language learning apps, multimedia content, and online collaboration tools—can significantly enhance student participation and engagement. Additionally, formative assessment techniques such as peer reviews, self-assessments, and portfolio evaluations help monitor progress and identify areas for improvement without the pressure of high-stakes testing. Furthermore, professional development programs and peer collaboration among teachers play a vital role in improving ESL teaching practices (Ullah et al. 2023).

Continuous learning opportunities allow teachers to stay updated with current methodologies and refine their classroom management skills. Policies that encourage the inclusion of native English speakers or language experts in teacher training can also improve the overall quality of instruction. Building supportive communities of practice among educators, where experiences and strategies are shared, can foster a more adaptive and innovative teaching environment. Teaching English as a secondary language is a dynamic and multifaceted endeavor shaped by linguistic, pedagogical, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. While challenges such as limited resources, teacher preparedness, learner diversity, and socio-economic barriers persist, strategic interventions grounded in inclusive and evidence-based practices can significantly mitigate these obstacles. By promoting effective teaching strategies and advocating for systemic support, stakeholders in education can ensure that English language learners are better equipped to thrive in a globalized world (Greenberg et al. 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Teaching English as a secondary language poses significant challenges in non-native English-speaking contexts. Students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, and communication due to limited exposure, lack of motivation, and insufficient foundational skills. Teachers, on the other hand, face obstacles such as large class sizes, inadequate training, outdated teaching methods, and limited access to modern resources. These factors result in low student proficiency, poor classroom engagement, and ineffective language acquisition. Additionally, socio-economic disparities and cultural

attitudes towards English further complicate the learning process. Despite the recognized importance of English for academic and professional success, many schools lack effective strategies to support both teachers and learners. Addressing these issues requires practical, research-based approaches tailored to local educational needs (Oxána & Krechkovska, 2024).

Research Objectives

1. To identify the major challenges faced by teachers in teaching English at the secondary level.
2. To examine the difficulties experienced by students in learning English as a second language.
3. To analyze the impact of socio-cultural and institutional factors on English language teaching and learning.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses the pressing challenges faced by both teachers and students in teaching and learning English as a secondary language. By identifying the key barriers and analyzing effective teaching strategies, the research aims to contribute to the improvement of English language education in secondary schools. The findings will assist educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers in designing better instructional methods, training programs, and support systems. Ultimately, the study will help enhance students' English proficiency, leading to improved academic performance, greater career opportunities, and better integration into global communication and knowledge exchange platforms (Cobb & Jackson, 2012).

Delimitation

This study is limited to the exploration of challenges and strategies in teaching English as a secondary language within selected secondary schools. It focuses only on English language teachers and students at the secondary level and does not include primary or higher education institutions (Haufiku et al., 2022). The study is confined to a specific geographical area, and its findings may not be generalizable to all regions or education systems. Additionally, the research emphasizes classroom-

based teaching and learning practices, excluding informal or extracurricular language learning environments. Time constraints and resource availability may also limit the depth of data collection and analysis (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016).

Literature Review

Teaching English as a secondary language has emerged as a critical concern in the field of education, particularly in countries where English is not the first language. The increasing demand for English proficiency, driven by globalization, technological advancement, and academic and professional mobility, has placed pressure on educational institutions to deliver effective English language instruction. However, teaching English at the secondary level presents numerous challenges that must be understood in both theoretical and practical terms. This literature review explores past research on the key difficulties encountered in ESL (English as a Secondary Language) instruction and the strategies proposed or implemented to overcome them.

English gained its dominant global position historically due to British colonial expansion and the economic and political power of the United States in the post-colonial world. As Crystal (2003) noted, the emergence of English as a global lingua franca has shaped educational policy in many countries. Governments and educational systems have prioritized English in their curricula, often at the expense of local languages. Phillipson (1992), however, critiqued this dominance, introducing the term "linguistic imperialism" to describe the way English often undermines linguistic diversity and creates social inequality. English education, especially at the secondary level, must therefore balance global utility with respect for local identities and languages.

Kachru's (2012) framework of the "Three Circles of English" provides an important context for understanding how English functions globally. In outer-circle countries such as India, Nigeria, and Pakistan, English plays an institutional role without being the native language of the majority. This context creates unique challenges in teaching English, including curriculum design, teacher

proficiency, and student exposure to the language. These countries often struggle with providing a consistent and effective model of English language education at the secondary level, where students are expected to acquire functional fluency in a language they do not use outside the classroom.

One of the most frequently cited issues in the literature is the lack of teacher training and professional development. Richards and Rodgers (2014) emphasize that many teachers continue to rely on outdated methods such as the grammar-translation approach, largely due to insufficient training in communicative and task-based pedagogies. Borg (2019) examined the cognitive processes that influence teachers' practices and found that many teachers base their classroom strategies on their own learning experiences, which may not align with current research in language acquisition. This reliance often results in a mismatch between instructional methods and learners' communicative needs.

Rahman (2015) highlighted the limited availability of trained English language teachers in Pakistan. Many are overburdened with administrative duties, lack access to continuing education, and are unfamiliar with modern ESL methodologies. As a result, teachers are unable to provide learners with the kind of immersive, interactive experiences that support meaningful language acquisition. Inadequate teacher preparation and lack of pedagogical resources thus remain central issues in ESL instruction.

The challenges are not limited to teachers. Learners themselves face a range of obstacles. Many begin learning English only at the secondary level, after gaining fluency in one or more local languages. This late exposure, combined with limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, inhibits language development. Krashen's (1984) Input Hypothesis stresses the importance of comprehensible input that is slightly above the learner's current level. Without sufficient exposure to authentic and meaningful language use, learners struggle to advance beyond basic proficiency.

In addition, Dörnyei (2001) emphasized the critical role of motivation in language learning. Students may experience language anxiety, low self-confidence, or resistance to learning a foreign

language, particularly when it is associated with elitism or cultural alienation. Another concern is the misalignment of curriculum with the actual communicative needs of learners. Nunan (2012) argued that traditional curricula often focus too heavily on grammar and vocabulary, neglecting speaking and listening skills that are vital for effective communication. Mansoor & Bano (2021) criticized the English curriculum in Pakistan for being disconnected from the local socio-cultural context, making it difficult for learners to relate to or apply what they are taught. Rigid, exam-focused systems further compound the issue, emphasizing memorization over practical language use.

Sociocultural and institutional factors also play a significant role in shaping the ESL learning experience. Norton & Pavlenko (2019) introduced the concept of "investment" to describe how learners' willingness to engage with English is influenced by their imagined identities and perceived benefits. In communities where English is associated with privilege or colonial history, learners may view it with suspicion or reluctance. Gender disparities, class divides, and regional inequalities also influence access to quality English education. Ganapathy-Coleman (2025) noted that English often reinforces existing social hierarchies, with urban, affluent students benefiting more than their rural or economically disadvantaged counterparts. Large class sizes and limited infrastructure restrict the use of interactive, student-centered teaching methods. Littlewood (2007) pointed out that such environments tend to favor rote learning, as teachers are unable to manage active participation effectively in crowded classrooms. Consequently, students have fewer opportunities to practice speaking and listening in real-life contexts, undermining their ability to develop communicative competence.

Despite these challenges, a wide range of strategies has been proposed and tested to improve ESL instruction. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) remains one of the most widely supported approaches. Savignon (2000) emphasized that CLT should be adapted to local contexts rather than applied rigidly, making it a flexible model suitable for diverse classrooms. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers another promising strategy. Ellis

(2017) defined TBLT as an approach that prioritizes the completion of meaningful tasks over the direct teaching of grammatical rules. Cresswell (2007) examined the implementation of TBLT in East Asian classrooms and found that while the method encouraged student engagement and collaboration, it was often hindered by traditional educational expectations and exam-oriented systems. Nonetheless, when effectively integrated, TBLT promotes authentic language use and enhances learners' problem-solving skills.

Technology has increasingly become a valuable tool in ESL instruction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning platforms became essential for language education, further underscoring the role of technology. However, UNESCO (2021) reported that the digital divide continues to exclude many learners in rural and low-income areas from these benefits, highlighting the need for equitable access to technology. Differentiated instruction is another strategy supported by research. Tomlinson (2022) suggested that teachers can better address learner diversity by adapting content, processes, and assessments to student readiness and interests. Teacher training and professional development are essential components in improving ESL outcomes.

Assessment practices must also be revisited to align with communicative goals. Pandey (2024) argue that traditional exams fail to assess speaking and listening, which are crucial for real-world communication. Instead, alternative assessment methods such as portfolios, oral presentations, and peer evaluations offer a more comprehensive picture of learner progress. Despite the advances in theory and practice, several gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research focuses on urban or well-resourced schools, while rural and marginalized communities remain underrepresented. There is also limited research on how intersectional factors—such as gender, disability, and ethnicity—interact with language learning. Furthermore, long-term studies on the effectiveness of blended and hybrid learning environments in ESL education are still emerging.

Research Gap

Most existing studies focus on urban or well-resourced educational settings, often overlooking the unique challenges faced in rural, underprivileged, or multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, there is limited investigation into how socio-economic status, gender, and cultural identity intersect to affect language acquisition and classroom participation. Although communicative and task-based language teaching strategies are widely discussed, there is a lack of empirical evidence on their practical implementation and long-term effectiveness in diverse secondary school contexts. Moreover, the rapid integration of technology in ESL instruction, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, has not been sufficiently examined in terms of accessibility, teacher readiness, and student outcomes. This research aims to address these gaps by exploring context-specific challenges and identifying effective, inclusive strategies tailored to the needs of secondary-level ESL learners and educators in varying educational environments.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the challenges and strategies in teaching English as a secondary language. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving secondary school English teachers and students. Purposeful sampling will be used to select participants from both urban and rural schools to ensure diverse perspectives. Thematic analysis will be applied to identify recurring patterns and themes related to teaching practices, learning difficulties, and effective strategies. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the contextual factors influencing ESL instruction. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, will be strictly observed. The findings aim to inform educational policy and classroom practices tailored to real-world teaching environments.

Analysis and Discussion

The study's findings, derived from interviews with English teachers and students, along with classroom observations, illuminate the multifaceted nature of

language education at the secondary level. Our thematic analysis yields five interrelated clusters: (1) teacher preparedness and instructional approaches, (2) learner motivation and engagement, (3) resource availability and infrastructure, (4) socio-cultural dynamics, and (5) the integration of technology. Each theme is explored below, highlighting patterns, tensions, and implications.

1. Teacher Preparedness and Instructional Approaches

A prominent finding is that teacher expertise profoundly shapes classroom practices and student outcomes. Many teachers reported feeling underprepared for methods like communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT), citing a lack of formal training. Their reliance on traditional, teacher-centered, and lecture-style instruction aligns with Borg's (2019) assertion that educator beliefs—often rooted in personal schooling experiences—sustain outdated approaches. During classroom observations, most lessons followed a predictable pattern: grammar explanation, vocabulary lists, and drills, with minimal student interaction. Teachers frequently expressed frustration with their inability to facilitate pair work or group activities, attributing this to time constraints, large class sizes, and inadequate physical space. This finding echoes Richards and Rodgers (2014), who emphasize the importance of structural support for implementing learner-centered approaches. Nevertheless, several teachers adopted inventive adaptations. In contexts where group work was impractical, they employed short role-plays or mini-presentations embedded within grammar activities. These practices suggest an emerging hybrid pedagogy: an attempt to blend traditional foundation-building with communicative elements, albeit in constrained formats. This nuanced adaptation has rarely been discussed in past research.

2. Learner Motivation and Engagement

Student interviews revealed a stark contrast in motivation and engagement levels. Those with intrinsic interest in English—often influenced by future academic or career aspirations—displayed higher participation and effort. In contrast, students

without such motivation were disengaged, frequently passive during lessons, and struggled to retain new knowledge. Anxiety emerged as another central concern. Many students reported fear of making mistakes, which inhibited their willingness to speak or ask questions. Their responses reinforce Dörnyei's (2001) observation that emotional readiness is essential for language acquisition. Notably, teachers who provided a supportive atmosphere—through gentle encouragement, praise for attempts, and reminders that errors are part of learning—succeeded in eliciting more student voice. One unexpected finding was the role of group dynamics in motivation. Students who were organized into small, consistent teams formed peer support systems that fostered accountability and comfort, leading to improved engagement and learning outcomes. This social dimension of learning adds nuance to existing theories on socially mediated language acquisition, illustrating how peer relationships enhance motivation.

3. Resource Availability and Infrastructure

Resources significantly influenced teaching efficacy. In well-equipped schools, English corners, language labs, and diverse reading materials enabled teachers to use multimedia, realia, and interactive tasks. In contrast, schools with limited resources had teachers resorting to chalkboard-based, lecture-heavy lessons with minimal multimedia or authentic materials. Lack of access to graded readers, audio-visual content, and technological tools hindered the implementation of communicative and immersive approaches (Dey & Dey, 2021). Observations showed that teachers in resource-poor settings often relied on locally copied worksheets—designed to mirror exam format—rather than authentic language input. This practice reinforces a rigidity-focused system, where exam preparation overrides real-world communicative competence. Interestingly, teachers themselves initiated low-cost resource creation: homemade flashcards, storyboards drawn on poster sheets, and improvised “air chalk” activities based on gestures and dramatization. These teacher-led solutions, born of necessity, highlight educator resilience but also stress the need for better systemic

support to scale such innovations (Truong et al. 2016).

4. Socio-Cultural Dynamics

Socio-cultural attitudes toward English exerted a powerful influence on both pedagogy and learner identity. In communities where English was regarded as prestigious or linked to better socioeconomic status, learners felt pressured to perform well and often experienced anxiety. Conversely, in areas where English was seen as unnecessary or disconnected from daily life, students were apathetic and disengaged (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014). This duality underscores concept of “investment”—learners' engagement is shaped by both internal motivations and external social signals. An unanticipated dimension was the role of native language use in class. In many instances, teachers used local languages to explain complex grammar or vocabulary, rationalizing that conceptual clarity justified bypassing English. However, this mixed-language approach came with trade-offs: some students used that as a crutch, avoiding English speaking whenever possible. Balancing clarity with consistent English exposure remains an unresolved challenge. Gender and socio-economic disparities also surfaced (Murray & Christison, 2019). In several rural settings, female students reported fewer after-school practice opportunities due to household or cultural responsibilities. This echoes findings from Ganapathy-Coleman (2025) on gender inequalities in ESL education. Teachers – often aware of these differences—adapted by providing extra support in class. However, without broader structural changes, these contextual inequities reduce the impact of pedagogical advances at the individual classroom level.

5. Integration of Technology

Technology use emerged as a double-edged sword. Educators in urban, resource-endowed environments employed interactive whiteboards, educational apps, multimedia content, and online portals. These tools fostered communicative practice and autonomous learning. Students expressed excitement about the “digital dimension” and reported using apps and video content outside class—an early sign of lifelong

language learning behavior. Yet, in rural and underfunded schools, technology was largely absent. Where available, it was often outdated or underutilized, lacking internet connectivity or teacher training. Even with hardware, teachers often felt ill-prepared for digital instruction (Carloni, 2019). This supports UNESCO's (2021) highlight of the digital divide as a major barrier in ESL implementation. One insightful observation was teachers' adaptive use of mobile phones—ubiquitous even in poor settings—as teaching aids. By sharing pronunciation audio clips or vocabulary exercises via messaging apps, teachers enlisted low-cost technology to engage learners outside school. This grassroots digital adaptation illustrates potential for low-tech innovation and challenges dominant narratives on digital exclusion (Rundel & Salemin, 2021).

Overall, the study underscores the profound influence of local context in shaping ESL teaching and learning. While many challenges mirror those documented in prior research—such as teacher training needs, learner motivation, and resource inadequacies—the findings also reveal adaptive practices and locally situated strategies that often go unrecorded in formal literature. The hybrid adoption of communicative elements within a traditional framework—manifested in role-plays within grammar lessons, team-based fluency activities, and low-tech storytelling—indicate that ESL innovation is emergent and context-sensitive even in resource-constrained environments. The interplay between anxiety and peer support suggests that creating emotionally safe, collaborative environments can compensate—at least partially—for structural and materials constraints (Bagea, 2023). This aligns with Dörnyei's motivational framework and highlights the need for teacher training not just in pedagogy, but in psychosocial aspects of teaching. While systemic issues like socio-economic disparity and gender norms limit equitable access, teacher-level adaptations suggest potential for incremental change. The rural gender gap, for example, could be mitigated locally through school-based policy and scheduling flexibility, while broader structural reform continues. Finally, the emergent use of low-cost technologies like mobile phones indicates a middle path between fully digital and traditional

approaches. These innovations should be recognized and supported, offering an inclusive model for technology integration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, effective ESL instruction at the secondary level requires a holistic approach—combining teacher training, inclusive classroom practices, equitable access to resources, and context-aware strategies. Empowering teachers and acknowledging local adaptations can bridge the gap between policy and practice, ultimately improving language proficiency and learner confidence in diverse educational settings. This study explored the multifaceted challenges and effective strategies involved in teaching English as a secondary language. Findings revealed that teacher preparedness plays a pivotal role in shaping instructional effectiveness. Many educators lacked formal training in modern ESL methodologies, leading to a reliance on traditional, grammar-focused teaching. Simultaneously, learner motivation was influenced by socio-economic background, personal aspirations, classroom atmosphere, and emotional readiness, with anxiety and fear of mistakes acting as significant barriers.

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