

Barriers to Learning English as a Second Language in the Public High Schools of Raparin Area

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the obstacles to acquiring English as a second language within the public high schools of the Raparin Area. The study was conducted within these public high schools, involving a total of 40 students spanning grades 10 through 12. The investigation revealed that the use of the mother tongue constitutes a crucial impediment to the enhancement of students' proficiency in their second language. Furthermore, the learning environment plays a pivotal role in shaping the journey of language acquisition. Significantly, the presence of large class sizes exerts a notable impact on their ability to fully engage in classroom activities and collaborate effectively with their peers. Additionally, the teaching methods and conduct of instructors emerged as significant factors, with the results indicating students' dissatisfaction with the Grammar Translation Approach employed by their teachers. Conversely, students' motivation to learn English and the prestige associated with the language were identified as positive factors facilitating their English language learning.

Keywords: English language, Learning environment, Teaching method, Students' motivation

1. Introduction

In today's world, mastering English as a second language presents students with a unique opportunity to join a global community enriched by its diverse cultures. However, the

journey toward proficiency in a second language is not devoid of hurdles. According to Verghese (2009), several factors influence the second language learning process, encompassing attitudes, self-assurance, motivation, duration of language exposure, classroom dynamics, environmental factors, family background, and the presence of capable instructors. This research sets out to delve into these challenges, with a specific focus on high school students in the Raparin Area. By closely examining the impediments that these learners encounter while striving to acquire English as their second language, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the field of language acquisition.

The main objective of this research is to comprehensively investigate the obstacles faced by high school students in the Raparin Area as they embark on their journey to learn English as a second language. By shedding light on the specific challenges confronting these students, this research seeks to deepen our comprehension of the intricacies associated with second language acquisition. Ultimately, the findings of this study aspire to inform educational practices and policies, thus facilitating more effective language learning experiences for students.

This paper tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges do students of high schools in the Raparin territory face when learning English as their second language?
2. How does the dominance of the mother tongue affect the process of learning English as a second language among high school students in the Raparin Area?
3. To what extent does the learning environment, including factors such as class size and teaching methodology, influence the language learning experience of high school students in the Raparin Area?
4. What role does motivation play in shaping the effectiveness of English language learning among high school students in the Raparin Area?

These research questions have been formulated based on the diverse barriers identified within the existing literature, ranging from the influence of the mother tongue and learning environment to students' motivation. Addressing these questions will enable a comprehensive exploration of the challenges high school students face in their pursuit of acquiring English as a second language in the Raparin Area.

2. Literature Review

Learning English as a second language nowadays opens up the chance for students to be part of a community with a different culture, but the process is not easy and there are a number of obstacles on its way. Fritsch (1998) states that the learners of second language are at disadvantage for success because they face many barriers, below are the most common ones:

1) The dominance of mother tongue

High school students in Raparin Area use Kurdish language respectively as their mother tongue and take English as a second language and compulsory subject. In such situation

Krashen (1981) highlights that “syntactic errors in adult performance” occur due to the use of mother tongue in the life of a learner and this impact remains for a long period in the mind of a learner.

2) Learning environment

Most of the researchers agree that learning environment specifically the size of the class give students a chance to be grouped affect the process of language learning. Malik (1996) believes that in the presence of poor and worn out teaching methodology creates obstacles and hindrances in way of teaching and learning to the large classes. Also Gibbs and Jenkins (1992) pointed out that the increase in the number of the students as in the large classes, many difficulties in teaching and learning occur. Referring to the group-working V. Tafani (2009) states that if students in foreign language classes intend to collaborate in groups, then activities should be structured in ways that students collaborate and talk to each other. They need to communicate face to face.

3) Students’ motivation

Motivation can be seen as one of the barriers that may face the students to learn English as a second language. R. C. Gardner, R. N. Lalonde, and R. Moorcroft added that motivation influences language achievement. Also R. C. Gardner and P. D. Mac Intyre opined that integrative approach might exert positive interest towards learning a language due to increased motivation level. Moreover, McDonough (1983) stated that motivation of the students is one of the most important factors influencing their success or failure in learning language.

4) The behavior of the teachers

Due to the fact that teachers play a major role in the process of second language learning and they have always been expected to set a good example for learners, to provide a model of behavior, so teachers should be accountable for bringing out the desired changes in the behavior of the learners. In this case, the education and training of teachers is always needed for effective learning outcomes. For this purpose, Asher (1982) believed that the most important role of teacher is the director of students’ behavior. Also I. A. Khan (2011) advises teachers to undergo specific professional development programs in order to be update and equipped in particular domains.

5) Language objectives and the awareness of the teachers

Language objectives are defined as statements, focusing on both oral and written language that students need in order to carry out the activities associated with the content objectives of the lesson. Language objectives are closely related to content objectives and are ideally designed to facilitate students’ knowledge and learning, how they learn, and behavioral indicators of displaying that they have learned. Language objectives outline the specific language features that learners must use to talk, read, write, and hear within a lesson in order to achieve their learning goals. S. Andrews (2007) states that the implementation of language

awareness in the classroom depends on the teacher's ability to provide instruction that engages and supports students in their language learning process.

6) Language anxiety

Language anxiety is another crucial factor that seems to be inevitable in the English language teaching and learning situation. M. W. Eysenck describes language anxiety as nothing but just an apprehension of the learner when he gets ready to acquire the target language. Similarly V. I. Trylong states that there is always a negative effect of the language anxiety on the learning of a second or foreign language. R. Von Worde (2003) adds more and highlights that the increase in language competence is dependent upon reduction in anxiety level. Moreover, Young (1991) claimed that language anxiety caused by the learners' personal and interpersonal anxiety, learners' beliefs about language learning, instructors' beliefs about language teaching, instructor-learner interactions, classroom procedures, and language testing.

7) English curriculum

The material or curriculum plays a role in second language learning specifically when it is designed with knowing the needs of teacher and learners. Regarding to this L. Tylor (2006) addresses it has been a custom of ELT that it is expected from the learners of L2 that they would accept the materials regardless of their own needs and identities.

8) Grammar translation as the dominant approach

Grammar translation method was called the classical method since it was first used in the teaching of the classical language, Latin and Greek (Chastain 1988). This approach is a way of studying a language through the analysis of its grammar rules, memorization and lists of vocabulary with the purpose of applying this knowledge of translating sentences and text into and out of the target language (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This method is still common in many countries around the world, and still appeals to those, interested in language from an intellectual and linguistic perspective (Tylor). But in his "Principles of Language Learning and Teaching" H. Douglas Brown (1994) states, "It does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in language learning.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted in the public high schools of the Raparin area within the Kurdistan region of Iraq in the year 2023. The primary objective of this study was to ensure the credibility and dependability of both the data collected and the resulting conclusions.

To gather the necessary information, a meticulously designed questionnaire was employed. The questions in the questionnaire were thoughtfully customized to align with the unique characteristics of the participating students, the specific context in which the research was conducted, and the chosen research topic. The questionnaire was thoughtfully administered to students in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, with a total of 40 carefully selected participants for data collection. A deliberate effort was made to ensure a balanced gender distribution, encompassing both male and female students. Within the participant pool, 32.5%

were drawn from the tenth grade, another 32.5% from the eleventh grade, while the remaining 35% represented the twelfth grade.

Following the meticulous data collection process involving all participants, a comprehensive analysis was conducted. This analysis was instrumental in facilitating the interpretation of the research findings and drawing meaningful conclusions. To ensure the rigor of the study, various statistical and qualitative analysis techniques were employed, including surveys, interviews, and content analysis. The research team also took measures to safeguard the anonymity and privacy of the participants, and ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study.

Additionally, this study adhered to a clear and systematic research methodology, incorporating a detailed review of relevant literature to build upon existing knowledge in the field. This literature review served as a solid foundation for the research design and data analysis.

In sum, the study was conducted with the utmost attention to detail, ethical standards, and a robust research methodology to ensure the validity and reliability of both data and outcomes.

4. Findings

In order to identify the challenges faced by high school students in the Raparin territory when learning English as a second language, a set of statements was devised to investigate their motivations and feelings regarding the issue. The students received a collection of fifteen statements, each paired with four response choices: Strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

Table 1 below presents the students' perspective on the role of the mother tongue in the process of second language learning. 97.5% of the participants agree that the teacher uses both Kurdish and English languages when speaking to them in English class, while only 2.5% disagree. The results also illustrate that 70% of the respondents are interested in having a class in English only, whereas 30% prefer it in mixed languages.

Table 1. The dominance of mother tongue

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The teacher uses both Kurdish and English languages when he/she talks to us in English class.	27	12	1	-
The class would be much more interesting if the teacher used only English language.	12	16	10	2

Figure 1 expresses the participants' viewpoints on the environment in which they study. 70% of them stated that their class is large in size, and they don't have an equal chance to participate in all activities, while 30% disagree. Additionally, 67.5% of the respondents think that because of the class size, they are unable to work in groups with classmates, and this has affected their language competence, while the rest do not share this view.

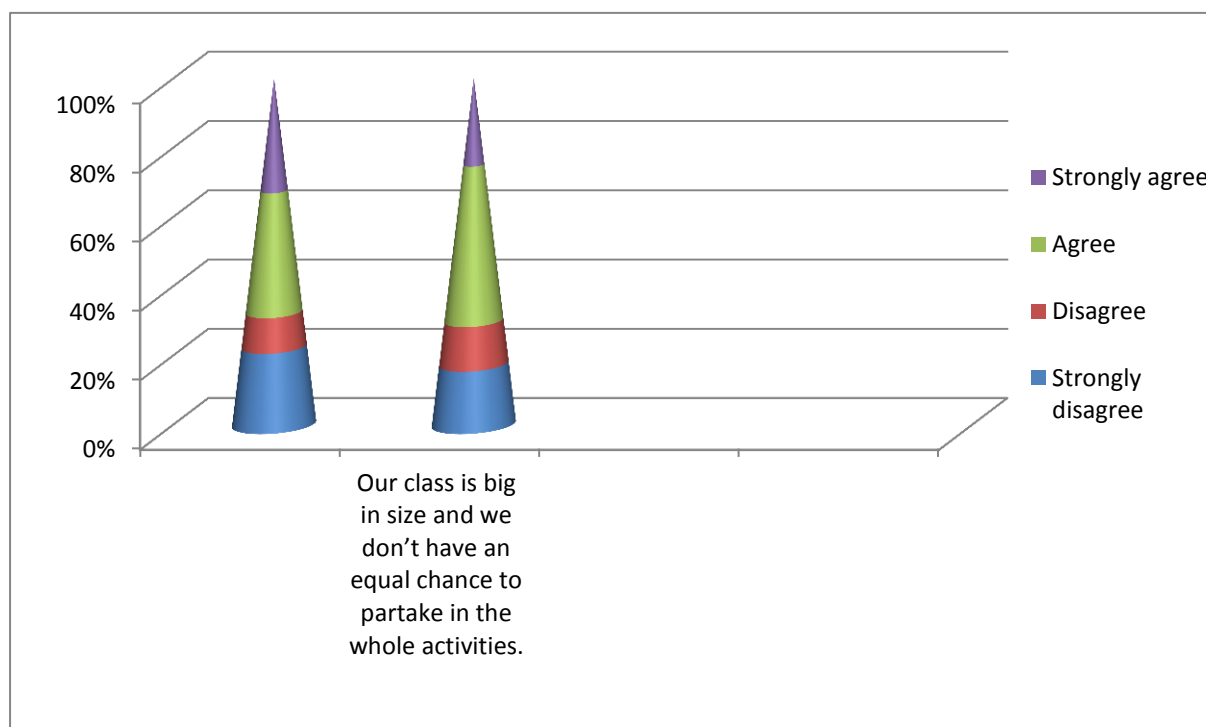


Figure 1. Learning environment

Table 2 illustrates the students' perceptions on the teachers' behavior and the methods used for teaching them. More than half (57.5%) of the participants agree that their English instructor behaves normally with them but does not set challenging learning goals, while 42.5% disagree. Additionally, 67.5% believe that the instructions provided by the teacher do not support English learning, while the rest think the opposite. The results show that 72.5% of the students assert that the instructor's teaching method is poor and not suitable for the classroom size, while 27.5% disagree. For 62.5% of them, the instructor's method does not enhance their communicative abilities. Moreover, 67.5% of the students believe that their instructor focuses solely on grammar rules, memorization, and vocabulary comprehension. Furthermore, 62.5% of them conclude that listening and speaking tasks are the most ignored aspects of their English class, while 27.5% disagree.

Table 2. Students' perceptions on the teachers' behavior and methods

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Our English instructor behaves with us normally, but he/she does not set challenging goals for learning.	12	11	7	10
The instructions that the teacher provides don't support learning English.	15	12	5	8
The method that the instructor takes is poor and doesn't fit with the number of students in the classroom.	16	13	6	5

The method that our instructor takes doesn't enhance our communicative abilities.	17	8	4	11
Our instructor just concerns about grammar rules, memorization and vocabulary comprehension.	15	12	7	6
Listening and speaking tasks are most ignored in our English class.	8	17	8	7

Figure 2 presents students' attitudes towards English as a second language in the high schools of Raparin territory. In total, 100% of the participants agree that English is the most widely spoken language in the world; hence, they are interested in learning it. The majority of students, comprising 90% sees English as their favorite subject and wish to study it further, while 10% hold a different opinion. Regarding the study materials, 55% of the respondents believe that the English materials they are provided with do not meet their needs, whereas 45% disagree.

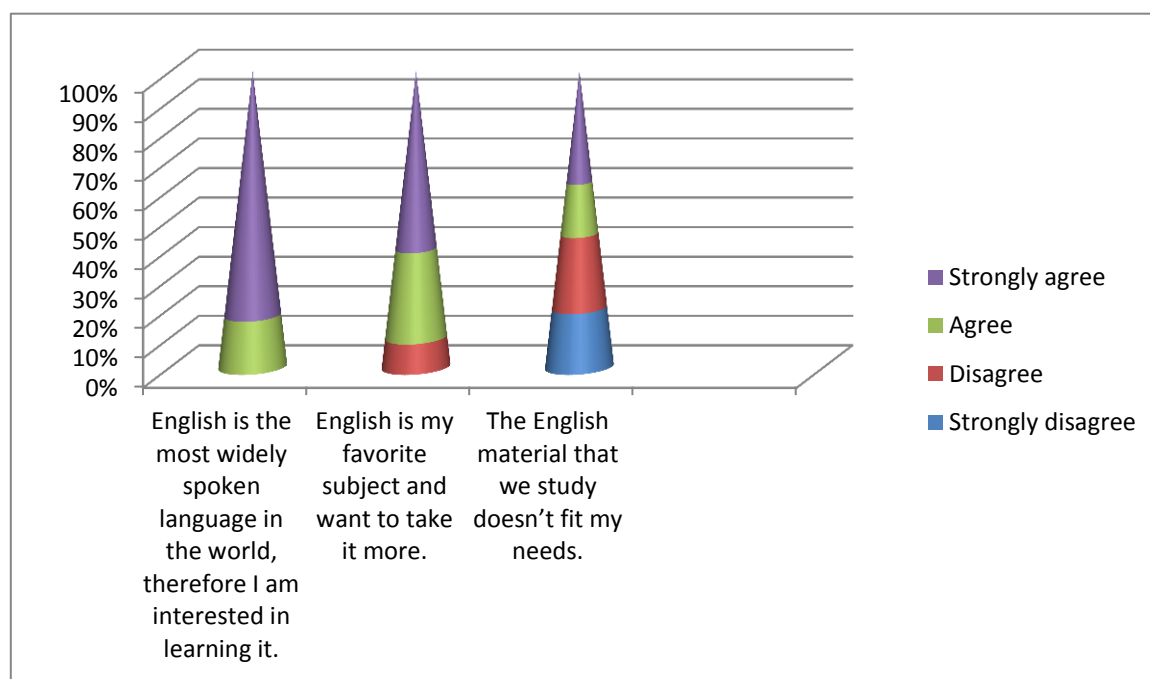


Figure 2. Students' motivation towards English Language

Figure 3 below demonstrates the role of anxiety in the process of English language learning among the high school students in Raparin Area. 65% of the participants confirm that their anxiety increases when they join the English class, while 35% do not confirm it. 70% of them think that their anxiety is caused by the teacher-students negative interaction, while 30% do not think so.

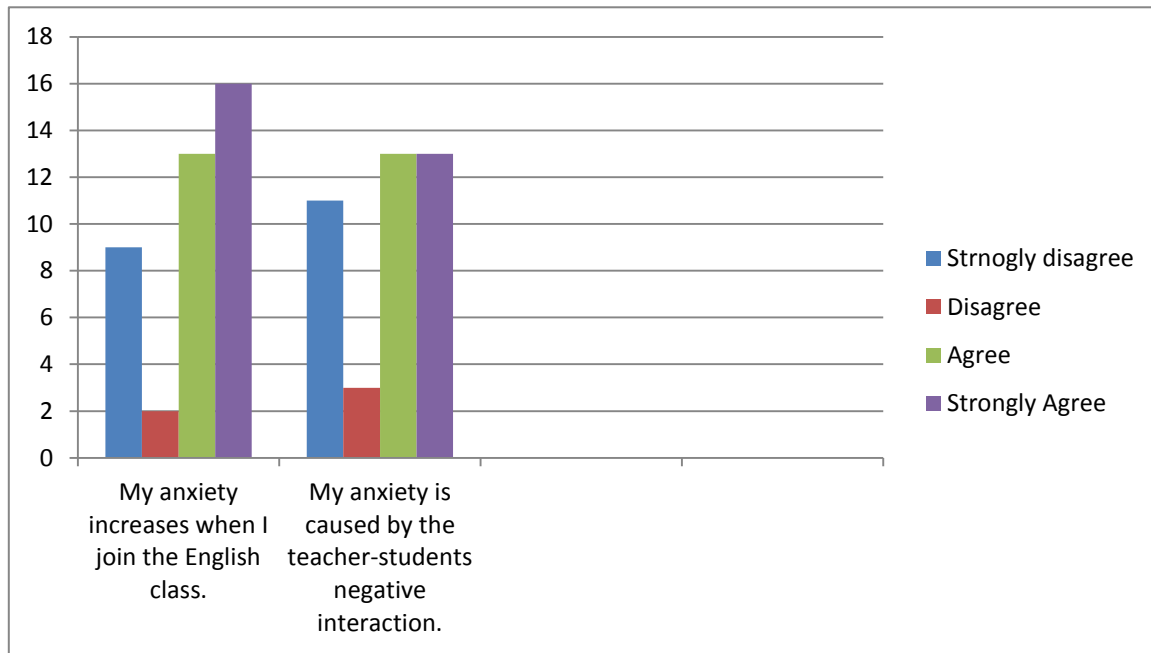


Figure 3. The influence of anxiety on the students

5. Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to reveal the obstacles that high school students face during their English learning process. To achieve this goal, a number of questions were formulated, and the responses to these questions are expressed below.

1. What challenges do students of high schools in the Raparin territory face when learning English as their second language?

The dominance of mother tongue, learning environment, the behavior and methods that have been used by the teachers and the anxiety of the students are the most common barriers that face the students of high schools in Raparin Area when learn English as a second language. This finding ultimately agrees with the words of Fritsch (1998) who stated that the learners of second language are at disadvantage for success because they face many barriers like; mother tongue dominance, the environment of learning, anxiety, lack of motivation, and Language objectives and the awareness of the teachers.

2. How does the dominance of the mother tongue affect the process of learning English as a second language among high school students in the Raparin Area?

The results presented in table (1) confirm that about all the participants agree that their teachers use mixed languages in their English class and more than two-third of them are only interested in having a class in English. This result goes with the words of Krashen (1981) who highlighted that “syntactic errors in adult performance” occur due to the use of mother tongue in the life of a learner and this impact remains for a long period in the mind of a learner.

3. To what extent does the learning environment, including factors such as class size and teaching methodology, influence the language learning experience of high school students in the Raparin Area?

About seventy percent of the participants (see. Figure1) stated that their class is large in size, and they don't have an equal chance to participate in all activities and due to their class size, they are unable to work in groups with classmates, and this has affected their language competence, this result matches the assertion of Gibbs and Jenkins (1992) who pointed out that the increase in the number of the students as in the large classes, many difficulties in teaching and learning occur. The result also agrees with the words of Tafani who illustrated that if students in foreign language classes intend to collaborate in groups, then activities should be structured in ways that students collaborate and talk to each other.

Regarding the learning environment, the methods used by the teachers also play a crucial role in the process. The results presented in table (2) prove that around two-third of the high school students in Raparin Area are not happy with the method (Grammar translation approach) that taken by the instructors. This result goes with the words of Tylor who stated that this method is still common in many countries around the world. And matches the assertion of Douglas Brown (1994) who asserted that this approach does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in language learning. Also, goes with the words of Chastain who named Grammar translation method as the classical method since it was first used in the teaching of the classical language.

4. What role does motivation play in shaping the effectiveness of English language learning among high school students in the Raparin Area?

The results expressed in figure (2) confirm that the students of high schools in Raparin Area have a positive attitude towards English language and they want to take further English classes. This result agrees with the words of Gardener, Lalonde, and Moorcroft who highlighted that motivation influences language achievement. And this result matches the words of McDonough who stated that motivation of the students is one of the most important factors influencing their success or failure in learning language. Also goes with the declaration of Gardener and Mac Intyre who opined that integrative approach might exert positive interest towards learning a language due to increased motivation level.

6. Conclusion

In the public high schools of Raparin Area, students face a number of challenges. This research has focused on these obstacles and explored their influence on the language learning experience of these students.

Mother tongue dominance remains a common challenge for students. The majority of participants in this study affirm the use of both Kurdish and English languages in the classroom and express a desire for classes conducted exclusively in English. Additionally, the learning environment assumes a crucial role in molding the language learning journey. The substantial class sizes reported by most participants had a notable impact on their capacity to engage fully in classroom activities and cooperate effectively with their peers. Teachers'

methods and behaviors also emerged as significant factors. The majority of students expressed dissatisfaction with the Grammar Translation Approach used by the teachers.

On the other hand, motivation proved to be a relatively positive factor. High school students in the Raparin Area illustrated a positive attitude toward learning English, with a majority expressing interest in further English language studies.

In light of these findings, it is advisable that educators and policymakers prioritize addressing these barriers to enhance language learning. Moreover, educators can enhance their teaching strategies and cultivate a more conducive learning environment through continuous professional development programs. This collective effort can empower high school students to actively participate in the global community by facilitating their journey in mastering English as a second language.

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