

## Investigating the Difficulties that Face English Language Teachers in Teaching ESL at Private and Governmental Secondary Schools in Northern Syria.

البحث في الصعوبات التي تواجه معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية في المدارس الثانوية الخاصة والحكومية في شمال سوريا

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of teaching a second language English among Northern Syrian public and private secondary school in the academic year 2023 \2024. It aims to identify and study some of the challenges that teachers face, evaluate the contribution of the social, political, and economic factors in the educational process, and compare the challenges among public and private schools. The present study used a descriptive-analytical approach, and data was collected from 187 teachers through a questionnaire. The findings suggest significant barriers, including access to modern educational technology, a shortage of teaching resources, and a paucity of options for teacher training. But there's more going on for public schools, overcrowding in their classrooms, for private schools' unpredictable allocation of funds and resources, socio-political instability in the region, and the challenges faced by teachers in keeping students engaged and managing class behavior as well as addressing different learning needs further worsened the situation. In addition, the lack of administrative support and low parental participation hindered good teaching. The study also recommended

enhancing teacher training programs, improving school infrastructure, providing continuous administrative and technical support, and stronger collaboration between schools and parents based on these findings. It also stressed increasing public awareness of the need for English language education. This article is one of several that aims to provide better insight into the educational challenges in Northern Syria while also offering real solutions to improve teaching and support educators in their professional capacities.

**Keywords: Difficulties, English Language Teachers, ESL , Northern Syria.**

### الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تحديات تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية في المدارس الثانوية العامة والخاصة بشمال سوريا خلال العام الدراسي 2024/2023. وتسعى إلى تحديد وتحليل بعض التحديات التي يواجهها المعلمون، وتقييم تأثير العوامل الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية على العملية التعليمية، ومقارنة التحديات بين المدارس الحكومية والخاصة.

اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، وتم جمع البيانات من 187 معلمًا عبر استبيان. وكشفت النتائج عن وجود عوائق كبيرة تشمل: نقص الوصول إلى التكنولوجيا التعليمية الحديثة، شح الموارد التعليمية محدودة فرص التدريب للمعلمين.

بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تواجه المدارس الحكومية مشكلة الاكتظاظ في الفصول الدراسية، بينما تعاني المدارس الخاصة من عدم انتظام تمويلها وتوزيع الموارد. كما تفاقمت التحديات بسبب: عدم الاستقرار الاجتماعي والسياسي في المنطقة، صعوبات في إشراك الطلاب وإدارة السلوك الصفّي، عدم القدرة على تلبية احتياجات التعلم المتنوعة. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن ضعف الدعم الإداري وقلة مشاركة أولياء الأمور يعيقان العملية التعليمية. واستنادًا إلى هذه النتائج، أوصت الدراسة بما يلي تعزيز برامج تدريب المعلمين. تحسين البنية التحتية للمدارس. توفير دعم إداري وفني مستمر. تعزيز التعاون بين المدارس وأولياء الأمور. زيادة الوعي المجتمعي بأهمية تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. تساهم هذه المقالة في تقديم رؤية أعمق للتحديات التعليمية في شمال سوريا، مع تقديم حلول عملية لتحسين التدريس ودعم المعلمين في أدوارهم المهنية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية: الصعوبات، معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة، شمال سوريا**

### Introduction

English language proficiency has become crucial in today's globalized world. English has become the lingua franca of international communication, business,

and academia. It is the language of technology, science, and innovation. Proficiency in English opens up opportunities for individuals to connect with people from different cultures, access a wide range of resources, and pursue higher education or career prospects abroad.

In many countries where English is not the first language, there is a growing demand for English language education. As a result, the role of English language teachers has become increasingly important. These teachers play a vital role in equipping students with the necessary language skills to navigate the globalized world. Richard and Rodgers (2002) observe that, in contrast to English's globe's most popular foreign language learner, Latin held that position five centuries ago. It served as the dominant tongue within the Western World, governing education, trade, religious practices, and political administration. Therefore, teachers of English as a foreign language have encountered many problems or challenges in the course of their teaching. The challenges here are the difficulties and issues English teachers encounter when teaching in the classroom.

However, Sharma (2010) clarifies that on the various proficiency level learners and diverse students in a class, use of mother tongue during ELT class, absence of knowledge regarding the operation of modern technology and its use in ELT, teachers are not devoted toward their teaching and learning activities, there should not be sufficient use of audiovisual material, teaching hours overload, economic problems of the schools as well as the teachers, and so on.

With regards to challenges faced by English teachers, Harmer (2008, p. 176–85) lists different kinds of difficulties encountered by teachers while teaching English as a foreign or a second language in the classroom. Teachers also had experienced difficulties such as mixed ability classes, large class size, use of mother tongue, homework, problems with students' cooperation, and problems with students' speaking.

The same problematic issues and practices of ELT quality provided by Harmer (2008) are valid in this regard too. However, ELT difficulties and challenges are being conceived due to insufficient use of modern technology, large class sizes, lack of motivation, parental involvement, time constraints, and socio-political factors, all these difficulties are found in Northern Syria.

## **Aims and Objectives**

This study aims to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To examine the teachers' difficulties and problems of working with English as a second language in Northern Syria.
2. To evaluate the access and use of educational materials.
3. To suggest some practical methods to enhance the quality of English language teaching and to teach teachers in Northern Syria.

## **Literature Review**

As English is a global language now, it is well established in many countries worldwide in their educational system. Teaching English as a second language is a multifaceted and challenging task. Educators face a challenge to cater to various learners with unique language histories, learning styles, and cultural dynamics, and they need to keep learners engaged and motivated. Moreover, they are to learn new ways to teach and employ technologies under scarce support and resources. Hence, the challenge comes in contemporary setting of English being an international medium, teachers need to bring students up to par while being simultaneously on the lookout for life skills in communication for post academic avenues. Here we analyze those challenges to better understand the complex environment teachers need to navigate to teach the intricacies of the English language that manifests in such diverse ways.

### **internal and external factors**

Internal and external factors are generally referred to the elements that exist inside and outside every individual. Internal factors are dealt with those elements every individual brings with himself to the learning context and these components are influenced by other factors that persist in the environment which a learner lives. Not only environment affects the process of acquisition, but also the second/foreign language itself brings some other factors into this complex process of learning.

#### **External factors**

The learning process can be influenced by various circumstances, some of which are related to the environment where learning takes place. Two main types of settings should be distinguished: natural/informal contexts and educational/formal

contexts. Natural/informal contexts typically involve learning outside the classroom, often through interaction with native speakers of the target language, as well as immersion in their culture, customs, and social systems. On the other hand, formal contexts involve learning inside the classroom with the guidance of a teacher and the use of educational materials. Additionally, external factors may include the student's curriculum, culture, or social status.

Brianne (2006) states that external factors (include learning environment, length of exposure, and learning style) happen to the learner, not because of the learner.

### **Internal factors**

According to (Lorena Lara Carrillo 2016) a learning process could be strongly affected by a series of particular variables present in individual learners, which will determine their achievements and success. Those characteristics are not easily managed, inasmuch as they are inherent to humans, or, in other words, learners are not able to control them, for instance, their age, aptitude, gender, some aspects of personality, and a wide number of options which will be more clearly explained (vide infra). These are personal features that tend to be shown by students in specific learning situations, and which will determine their path in the process of acquisition of a new language (for example, learning pace, difficulties and assets). These are widely known as “internal factors”.

Brianne (2006) divides factors affecting language learning into two: internal and external factors. These divisions are not based on whether the features are specific to an individual or to a variety of learners, but rather on what level of control the learner has on each one. He stated that internal factors include those that are determined by the individual learner such as motivation, attitude, and personal and study habits. According to this theory, each of these (internal factors) is an individual component of the students' ability to learn a foreign language. For example, when motivation is low, study habits and attitudes are affected as well.

### **Large class size**

As defined by Wilson (2002, p. 2) in the explanation of class size (CS), it is “...the number of pupils in total placed with one teacher for part or whole of their teaching timetable”. That is, class size is the number of students with a teacher in a class. Based on this point a considerable body of research has attempted to answer

the question of “how many students are the best number for small and large classes?” For example, in the United States, perhaps one of the most famous class size studies was the STAR Project (Student-Teacher-Achievement-Ratios) undertaken in 1985 in Tennessee. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of class size on the teacher and students' achievement in both regular class size (22–25 students) and small class size (13–17 students).

### **Using the mother tongue**

Mother tongue, known as the first language or native language, is the language that a person has learned from birth and has grown up speaking. It's the language that is spoken by a person's family or community and is often the language used in the home environment.

Mother tongue plays a crucial role in a person's life as it shapes their identity and culture. It's the language in which people express their emotions, thoughts, and ideas. A child's first language is the foundation for learning and cognitive development, and it helps in the acquisition of other languages. In this way, first language, mother language and native language is known as L1, it is said that language where child breath first and that he gains mastery on that is also known as mother language and native language as well and it is also said that the language which is first time learnt by child and it mostly refers to that language in which child was brought and spends his time etc. As per Gass and Selinker (2008, p.7), "The native language is the first language that a person learns. It is alternatively called the first language, the mother tongue, and the primary language, or L1." On the other hand, the words second language, foreign language, and target language are mentioned as L2, meaning any language a child learns after their mother tongue or first language, or native language. In this sense, Gass and Selinker (2008, p.7) state that, “Second language is another language that a learner acquires after he/she has learnt his/her first language”. As both L1 and L2 are unavoidable in human life but the question is that is the use of L1 is effective in the EFL class or not. Is the use of the mother tongue in the classroom facilitative or not? The issue of the mother tongue as a barrier or assurance in learning English is examined. There is a common assumption that the child has to hear the second language so as to gain perfection in that target language. Cook (2008, p. 3) writes in this regard: The

pioneers of new language teaching (such as Henny Sweet and Otto Jespersen) stressed the good use of the spoken language and the naturality of language learning, and insisted that the second language should be used in the classroom (and not the first). There is a saying, “the more exposure more one would learn.” It is very difficult to be implemented in rural areas where students speak only their mother tongue. And in addition, here are the PSYCHOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS in the FL classroom. Theoretical arguments for and against using the mother tongue in the English classroom abound.

### **The role of Mother Tongue in ELT Classroom**

This is a good idea and something that has been debated for over a period of time concerning whether the learners’ mother tongue or first language (L1) should be included or excluded in their EFL learning and the method used to do this. The CLT teaching methodology has always advocated “English Only.” It is believed that L1 interference, language transfer, and other factors contribute to the mistakes students make during the process of learning a foreign language. That said, the permissibility of L1 in the classroom is still hotly debated. Many studies have been done, which have proven to be against or in favor of the use of L1 in the EFL class. It has been a widespread belief for quite some time now that learners have to learn English only through English and that there is absolutely no need for L1 in the classroom. According to Harmer (2001, p.47), the use of L1 in the foreign language classroom has started to be considered uncommunicative, boring, pointless, and irrelevant. Nowadays, the importance of the use of the mother tongue in ELT is given to some extent. According to Cook (2008, p. 3), the use of mother in specific plotlines can produce authentic users of L1

### **Doing homework problems**

Learners have to do lots of homework in order to acquire a new language and to improve their previously acquired language in an EFL setting. Most of the time, it requires them to work carefully, persistently, and energetically on it in the limited time they have after school. As learners have difficulties in doing homework, they may feel worried, hassled, and frustrated. If they do not receive emotional support or guidance to cope with these problems, their perseverance with their homework may lower and finally stop. If they continue to put an effort against these difficulties

persistently and energetically, their well-being may be affected. Furthermore, their vocabulary and grammar mistakes and learning strategies at home would be influenced; hence their well-being and self-efficacy ratings would decrease.

Informal homework practices have the power to elevate students' learning and better their language abilities, but when such educational activities are primarily designed to create a sense of compliance, they cannot support students' need to experience themselves as self-directed language learners (World English Journal & Aoumeur, 2017).

## **Teaching Methods**

### **Effective teaching strategies**

An essential condition to make teaching effective is the right use of teaching methods or strategies at the right time and in the right way (World English Journal et al., 2022). It is important for teachers to keep the element of variety alive in the ebb and flow of activities within the lesson to maintain and enhance the attention of the students. EFL/ESL teachers should employ an array of teaching strategies because theories on learning a second/foreign language propose that learners vary in their styles and preferences of learning. Some learners are comfortable in groups, whereas some adapt better in individual work. To cater to the diversity, teachers should provide group activities, individual activities, pair work, and class work in every lesson.

### **Classroom management techniques**

While working in large classrooms, EFL teachers should plan their lectures judiciously and avoid belaboring on some topics more than necessary. Islam (2009) recommends planning each lecture in two to three stages, while keeping the lecture 10 to 15 minutes in length. If students find longer lectures, it will decrease their interest. Moreover, Stone (2014) observed that nearly all respondents choose the topic, which was important to know, rather than easy to follow. The best strategy is to use maximum visual aids for better understanding and to involve students in the lecture.

Maintaining discipline and order in the large classes is another challenge cited in the works of Crossley and Widdowson (2002). The best technique to maintain the pace and order in class is pacing the lesson according to the students and

incorporating lighter social and entertaining elements such as magic tricks in lectures. This will revive their interest and focus and concentrate their attention (World English Journal & Rasheed H. Alamri, 2018).

### **Utilizing technology in teaching ESL**

English Language Teachers generally search for exactly blended and peaceful technology in ESL Classes in Global Environments, and this search has arisen various possibilities available along with non-availability from time to time, similarly regarding SNS Users which is a fact in case of globally connected users in English Only or Other than English L1/EL1/MT article. There is abundant literature on the dissatisfaction while using technology in ESL classrooms in general environments, Previous researchers established that ELTs, mainly DSLT have a strong belief that SNS could not be utilized for constructing the peaceful environment and preserving the standard while maintaining the moral and ethical implications. Early literature has blamed that language learners, along with ELTs & DSLTs might be exposed comprehension-wise in today's massive multimedia and ML contexts in GT, to which they are L1-users native, and print literate, and L2 users in English Only post literacy education of whole communication and print in English i.e., locally and internationally in L2 English at worldwide web as well.

### **Discussion and results**

The researcher used a questionnaire as a tool to collect data from the participants (Teachers' Questionnaire). The questionnaire was designed and administered by the researcher to investigate the difficulties that face teachers in teaching English Language in North Syria.

**Table No 1 Descriptive Statistics**

Variables		Total	Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	187	125	66.8
	Female		62	33.2
Years of Teaching Experience	0-5	187	62	33.2
	6-10		45	24.1
	10>		80	42.8
Teacher's Qualifications	Bachelor	187	123	65.8
	Master		64	34.2
Teacher's Institution	Public	187	159	85.0
	Private		28	15.0

## Gender

- **Males:** Represent 66.8% of the sample, totaling 125 individuals out of 187.
- **Females:** Constitute 33.2% of the sample, with a total of 62 individuals. The distribution indicates a predominance of males in the sample, which may reflect a more commonly observed male perspective in the educational context. Consequently, the findings are likely to be more reflective of the needs and perspectives of male teachers than female ones. This requires caution when generalizing the results to all teachers.

### 1. Years of Teaching Experience

- **0-5 years:** 33.2% of teachers have experience ranging between 0 and 5 years, totaling 62 individuals.
- **6-10 years:** 24.1% of the sample have 6 to 10 years of experience.
- **More than 10 years:** 42.8% which is 80 of the sample.
- **Researcher Perspective:** Experience distribution exhibits an overall diversity across experience levels, but longitudinally more experienced teachers tend to dominate, whose perspectives on educational policies and their impacts might be more accurate. However, this distribution may introduce a bias toward long-tenured teachers, necessitating cautious interpretation when considering the less-experienced groups.

### Teacher's Qualifications

1. **Bachelor's Degree:** 65.8% (n=123) members of the sample are bachelor graduates.

2. **Master's Degree:** 34.2% (n=64) of the sample have a master's degree.

3. **Researcher Perspective:** Most of the sample (25 teachers) are teachers by education and qualification. The nature of this outcome could imply some degree of academic familiarity among the sample, affecting their interaction with the educational policies. The 34.2 percent of teachers with master's degrees may very well provide a more nuanced perspective with a greater academic background.

### Type of Educational Institution

1. **Public Schools:** Teachers in public schools represent 85.0% of the sample, totaling 159 individuals.

2. **Private Schools:** Teachers in private schools constitute 15.0% of the sample, totaling 28 individuals.

3. **Researcher's Perspective:** The significant representation of public school teachers highlights a primary focus on the public education sector in this study. This distribution likely has a noticeable impact on the findings, as the factors influencing public schools differ significantly from those in private schools. Consequently, the results are expected to predominantly reflect the perspectives of teachers working in public schools, necessitating consideration of the limitations in generalizing the findings to teachers in private schools.

**Table No 2 Analysis of the questions statements**

No.	Question	Means	Standard Deviation
1	I find it difficult to meet the needs of all students due to their varying language proficiency levels.	3.00	1.376
2	Lack of educational resources negatively impacts my ability to teach the English language effectively.	2.77	1.358
3	The use of the mother tongue in the classroom hinders students' learning of the English language.	2.84	1.404
4	A large number of students in the class impede me from providing individual attention to each student.	3.05	1.415



No.	Question	Means	Standard Deviation
5	The lack of technology in the school affects the effectiveness of my lessons.	3.06	1.434
6	The available administrative support is insufficient to meet my educational needs.	2.96	1.419
7	Classroom size affects the quality of education and the implementation of modern teaching methods.	2.94	1.426
8	Poor infrastructure in schools led to a decline in English language teaching.	3.07	1.433
9	There is no enhancement of participation in workshops and educational conferences to exchange experiences and successful practices in English language education among teachers.	3.16	1.365
10	My school/institution does not provide continuous upgrading programs for infrastructure to improve English language education.	2.99	1.452
11	In my experience, the teacher-to-student ratio directly affects the quality of English language teaching and learning.	3.11	1.387

The findings presented in **Table (2)** above emphasize the significant influence of various factors within the educational environment, as well as social and political challenges, on the quality of education. Factors such as inadequate infrastructure (mean: 3.07) and limited participation in professional workshops and conferences (mean: 3.16) received notably high averages. These results suggest a shared agreement among participants on the need to enhance infrastructure and offer professional development opportunities to teachers, which are seen as essential steps in improving educational quality. Also, the study identifies several critical challenges undermining education quality, with student displacement from conflict zones (3.05 mean) and socioeconomic disadvantages (3.16 mean) emerging as particularly severe. These factors disrupt learning continuity and academic achievement in profound ways. Equally concerning are systemic issues like inadequate teacher compensation (2.79 mean) that erode educator motivation, and

the ongoing struggle to balance English instruction with mother tongue preservation (2.84 mean). While political instability (2.92 mean) and broader societal conflicts (2.84 mean) show relatively lower impact scores, they still significantly disrupt educational regularity. Together, these findings reveal a complex web of interrelated obstacles where humanitarian crises, economic pressures, linguistic tensions, and political instability collectively compromise educational outcomes. The data underscores the need for comprehensive solutions that address both the immediate symptoms and root causes of these multifaceted challenges.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

The findings highlight an urgent need to enhance education quality by focusing on several key pillars. Foremost among these is upgrading school infrastructure and providing suitable learning environments, coupled with strengthening professional training programs for teachers to equip them with modern pedagogical approaches. Equally crucial is providing psychological and social support for students, particularly those facing difficult circumstances such as displacement or fragile economic conditions. Simultaneously, we must not overlook other fundamental issues like improving teachers' income levels to boost their motivation, and adopting balanced teaching strategies that integrate English with native languages in ways that achieve linguistic proficiency while preserving cultural identity. Addressing these aspects comprehensively forms a roadmap for qualitative transformation in the education system, ensuring holistic and sustainable improvement that positively impacts all components of the educational process.

The results of the regression analysis presented in Table (3) above reveal a strong and statistically significant inverse relationship between the educational environment and the dependent variable. The unstandardized regression coefficient ( $B = -0.955$ ) indicates that for every one-unit increase in the educational environment, the dependent variable decreases by 0.955 units. This relationship is further supported by the standardized coefficient ( $Beta = -0.873$ ), which emphasizes the strength of this negative association. Additionally, the T-value ( $-24.332$ ) demonstrates the substantial impact of the educational environment on the dependent variable. The P-value ( $< 0.001$ ) also shows the statistical significance of

the connection, emphasizing that the findings are statistically significant and not due to chance.

**Table No 3 Pearson Correlation**

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Beta	T	P-Value
	B	Std. Error			
Education Environment	-.955	.039	-.873	-24.332	<.001
Constant			5.872		
R			.873a		
R Square			.762		
Adjusted R Square			.761		
F			592.051		
Sig.			<.001 <sup>b</sup>		

Thus, the null hypothesis states that there is no statistically significant relationship between the educational environment and the quality of education is rejected. Instead, finding the alternative hypothesis, which states that there is a relationship between those variables.

The adjusted  $R^2$  of the model (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.761$ ) illustrated that 76.1% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the changes in the independent variables, indicating that the regression model has enough explanation power. Additionally, the F-statistic value ( $F = 592.051$ ) and its corresponding significance level (Sig. < 0.001), further support the reliability and robustness of the model.

This should be expected as these results highlight the vital influence the educational environment can have on the dependent variable over other factors, i.e. quality of education. This highlights the need for an in-depth analysis of the underlying contributors to the inverse correlational relationship. An analysis of this kind can help to develop effective strategies and policies to enhance the educational milieu and minimize any adverse effects on educational outcomes.

## Report discussion

### 1. Educational Environment: Its Role in Education Quality

- The results indicate that the educational environment is one of the factors affecting the quality of the educational process. One of the greatest impediments to what we know of as 21st-century learning is weak and inadequate technology infrastructure in schools. As a result, teachers are hampered in their delivery of content, and students struggle to engage with the lessons given to them.
- The implications of the findings were also compounded by the infrequent occurrence of professional development opportunities that would enable practicing teachers to hone their skills or stay abreast of more effective methodologies in classroom teaching, making times also longer. Another factor to consider is that problems such as lack of administrative support, insufficient administrative resources, and transportation issues, contribute to leave the work of teachers not being individualized or characterized by good teaching despite not being taken into account in the calculation of their salaries, for many secondary schools are caravans or tents of students over 45 per tent, do not have institutional space (with appropriate conditions for the development of learning) to carry out their work.

### Recommendations

1. Enhancing the Educational Environment and Developing Infrastructure
2. Investments in School Infrastructure: The relevant technology should be used in educational institutions and, accordingly, in the development and modernization of school infrastructure. This includes modernizing facilities to establish conducive learning environments that promote innovative instructional approaches and enhance student engagement.
3. Building Permanent Schools: The focus should be to replace temporary learning spaces, such as tents and caravans (where many secondary schools currently operate), with permanent ones. Soaring numbers, often exceeding 45 students in a tent, make it hard for anyone to teach and harder still for students to learn. Permanent school construction needs to be established to create a sustainable learning environment.

#### 4. Enhancing Professional Development Programs for Teachers

Ongoing Professional Development: Teachers need comprehensive professional development opportunities that focus on the changing demands of an educational environment. These are helping improve the effectiveness of the education system by improving pedagogical practices, use of technology in teaching, and strengthening resilience in dealing with crises.

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