

ESL Teaching Strategies in Iraqi Public Schools

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Abstract

This study was set out to establish the main strategies employed by Iraqi public high school teachers in teaching English as a second language (ESOL). To accomplish this, a sample of 98 public high schools from the Kurdistan region was used for the study. From each of the schools, four ESOL teachers were selected and survey questionnaires and interviews were issued for filling based on which ELT teaching method they were trained to use and the actual strategies they found most effective in improving their student's proficiency. This was regards to English vocabulary usage, spelling, grammatical rule applications, reading and writing among other ELT usages at high school levels. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze data collected using the survey tools named above. This paved way for analysis of the findings and establishments of recommendations based on the review of literature and findings, which are the best ELT methods that Iraqi public high school teachers should employ.

KEYWORDS: English as a Second Language (ESL), ESOL, ESL teaching strategies,

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List of Abbreviations

ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESL	English as Second Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language

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Introduction

At the wake of an age where the world is increasingly becoming a global village, English learning has immersed itself as a crucial subject in most school curriculums across the world. The situation is the same in Iraq, where the government with assistance with UNESCO recently in 2011 established a program aimed at improving strategies used by teachers in various levels of learning in Iraqi schools, with the ultimate goals of enhancing English understanding among their students (Avci & Doghonadze, 2017). English as a second language teaching has always been a challenge for most teachers at different levels of learning but it has been observed to be even more challenging at higher learning levels.

Even with the rising importance of successful, it is crucial to understand what ESL teaching entails as well as the challenges of achieving the intended objectives. Concerning the former, Maxom (2013), stipulates that ESL entail teaching of core aspects of English understanding including grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, spelling, and composition. Underlying these are the basic grammar rules, which teachers must impart their understanding in their students including syntactic, semantic, phonological and morphological grammar categories.

Concerning the latter, English teaching and learning on the parts of students' in Iraqi public schools is mostly affected by political and cultural aspects in the past and recent times. Precisely, the dictatorial reign of Iran, which was characterized by many years of war and terror affected the expansion of the country's education system and, in turn, the teaching of English as a second language for eligible students (Avci & Doghonadze, 2017). Cultural factors have also hindered the effective establishment of progressive English teaching in Iraqi schools at all levels. One of the highlights here is they believe that girls should not attend school, something that is

still prevalent in many communities across the country despite efforts from UN groups to eliminate the retrogressive cultural trend. Additionally, the religious conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims has had a fair share in halting the effective development of the education system in Iraq, including the aspect of ESL teaching strategies.

One of the most significant challenge affecting teachers in imparting all aspects of English as a language and means of communication is the diverse native language for different students attending ESL classes (Concordia University, 2018). Apart from this, teachers face the challenge of students having different grasping capabilities as far as grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading and other parameters of English learning are concerned. Focusing on the subject of this paper, which is teaching strategies adopted by teachers in Iraqi public school in teaching English, both these challenges stand out as most significant relative to other challenges faced by teachers anywhere in the world in ESL classes.

Given that these challenges affecting overall teaching in most Iraqi schools, especially those in war zones are yet to find a fast solution, it is imperative that studies be developed to improve the teaching strategies used by teachers in teaching English. In this paper, the strategies, methods and any other instruments used by teachers in Iraqi public schools will be analyzed with a goal of developing better strategies in the future. In so doing, it will be possible to set a platform for enhancing effective ESL teaching in Iraqi schools, which will in turn reduce the need for Iraqi students to have to travel to USA, Canada, Britain and other countries with effective ESL teaching strategies and environments.

Significance of the Study

Iraq as a country has diverse languages used in teaching and formal communications. Kurdish is the most commonly used in most school in teaching various subjects offered

depending on the level of a student's education. This has left the country alienated from the fast-developing education systems, in many countries across Asia such as China and Japan, where English learning is a key part of the curriculums of most high schools in these countries. Even with this, it is evident that the Iraqi government, in collaboration with the United Nations and countries like Britain, and USA has laid plans to improve English teaching in from the third grade to high school level.

It therefore, follows that this study will provide a picture of the gaps in the teaching strategies used in teaching ESOL, mostly considering that students in the above levels of English learning have been identified to have problems understanding the language or communicating using the same. Additionally, most students from Iraqi schools are found to have problems of the nature of grammar and communication using English. Since these issues can be directly traced back to the methods used in teaching English lessons, this study will shed light on what improvements can be made as far as those adopted in other ESOL teaching classrooms in countries with better enhanced education systems.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to determine the strategies used by teachers in Iraqi Public High Schools in ELT. The study further purposes to delve into how the various ELT strategies are used to overcome challenges commonly faced by Iraqi high school students in developing English proficiency as far as grammar, vocabularies, spelling, reading, writing among other aspects of ELT are concerned. The following research questions were found paramount to the accomplishment of the mentioned study objectives.

Research Questions

a. What are the main ESOL teaching strategies used in Iraqi public high schools?

- b. What is the relationship between ESL teaching strategies and students' learning abilities?
- c. Are the methods used by different high school teachers in Iraqi high schools adequate in enhancing English learning?
- d. What can be done to improve traditional ESOL teaching strategies used in Iraqi schools?

Literature Review

Teaching a second language as a second one to the native language spoken by learners is always a challenging task and its success heavily lies with the competency of the teachers as well as the effectiveness of the teaching methods (Avci & Doghonadze, 2017). In the case of ESOL teaching at Iraqi public high school levels and any other levels where students can participate in the learning, it is notable that teachers chosen for the tasks are mostly of Iraqi citizenship. Concerning this, Naeimi & Foo (2014), points out that the former, having acquired English language teaching techniques from Iraqi Universities, where as seen above in the introduction that English language is not a well-established subject; have problems imparting proficient understanding of the language in their students.

At this point, it is crucial to note that Naeimi & Foo (2014), in their study comparing vocabulary-teaching strategies of Iranian EFL students, found out that there is a strong correlation between teachers' English proficiency and teaching mechanisms with how proficient their students understand the foreign language. As such, it is imperative to analyze the main strategies used in English teaching at various levels of high school education in Iraqi public schools.

Traditionally, teachers in teaching ESL classes have used the 'repeat after me' model in teaching English as a second language. This strategy is especially common in Iraqi schools where students are not exposed to environments where they can learn new English vocabularies

outside school, not mentioning how to pronounce the same. Also known as the Grammar-Translation method, this method of teaching ESL has been found to be mostly suitable in teaching new English vocabularies, analysis of grammatical rules in classroom environments, profoundly because the students at various high school levels are not acquitted with environments outside schools where they can expand their English vocabulary or grammatical rules applications.

Using this method, teachers use various teaching materials including government issued textbooks for each high school levels to provide references to their students. In this way, teachers are able to use visual aids, which is another ELT strategy used at lower levels of EFL teaching during the initial stages of English teaching in Iraqi schools. Concerning this point, English literacy outside public high school and other institutions of learning in Iraq ranges from average to low, the latter been the case in most rural areas across the country. Consequently, the use of the Grammar-Translation method by Iraqi high school teachers in ELT is and has been an effective teaching instrument, as far as the social conditions for most students here face outside ELT classes and more importantly outside school settings.

The Audio-Lingual Method, although mostly used at lower grades starting from the fifth grade where English lessons are introduced, it has been found as another crucial way of teaching ESL to Iraqi public high school students. In simple terms, the Audio-Lingual method takes a drilling teaching format where teachers employ a repetitive style in teaching new English vocabularies, grammatical rules, and other ELT concepts relevant to students at various levels in their high school education.

For ELT teachers teaching English classes in Iraqi public high schools, the Audio-Lingual ELT method is mostly suitable in overcoming challenges associated with English words

pronunciations, which is one of the leading problems in teaching English as L2 in most schools in Iran (Saeed & Jafar, 2016). The problem here emanates from the fact that most Iraqi students attending public high schools come from low to average income earning families. The implications of such economic status for these students are that they mostly live in communities where the literacy, especially English literacy is low. It therefore follows that the lack of exposure to an environment where they can listen or use certain English vocabularies of grammatical rules in communication concepts makes the Audio-Lingual a common ELT strategy for most teachers in teaching ELT classes at Iraqi public high schools. This is because the repetitive nature strategy used in teaching various ELT concepts makes a chance for the students to store the same in their minds, as opposed to when such concepts are taught passively as it the case with English teaching as a first language.

According to Hamza (2012), Memory strategies are other L2 teaching techniques used by ELT teachers in Iraqi public high schools in improving the understanding of learners' English language curriculum requirements. This method is mainly used in teaching new vocabulary to L2 English students. Essentially this, methods involves the use of words, which have the same meaning as English vocabularies and finding images that match these words. In so doing, it is possible for, teachers help students develop a metal ability to remember the meaning of new English vocabularies, mostly because the use of images eliminate the difficulty of remembering new English words, which is a common challenge facing L2 teachers. Additionally, the application of memory strategy, that is the matching new English words with closely associated with native words and finding images to match the meaning improve the ability of students in applying the words for communication and writing (Hamza, 2012). Narrowing down to the case Iraqi public school ELT teaching, where one of the main challenge affecting the effectiveness of

the same is average abilities to convey English pedagogy skills , this strategy is very effective in improving the proficiency of high school students in English language.

Methodology

Participants

For the purpose of this study, 98 bachelor level teachers from various public high schools were selected to determine the strategies used in ESOL teaching. The ages of these teachers ranged from 30 to 55 years, and the average teaching experience in this population sample was 21 years. 55 male and 43 female teachers with varying English teaching experiences respectively represented the sample. The teachers were contacted using face-to-face interviews despite the constraint of distance between the locations of different public high schools in Iraq selected for the study. It is worthy of noting that the selection of teachers from diverse locations across Iraq.

Instruments

To collect the data from the 98 participants selected for this research study, survey questionnaires and interviews were designed. For the participants close to the researchers, interviews consisting of nine questions designed to determine the teaching techniques used by the research subjects in ESOL classes. Questionnaires were issued via emails after researchers called participants in distant cities around Iraq. The questionnaires consisted of similar questions to those in the survey interviews. The participants were given a period of one week to fill and submit the questionnaires via email. The submissions of the interview and questionnaires were thereafter sent to ELT professionals to fine-tune their appropriateness of the purpose of the research study.

Procedure and Analysis

SPSS data analysis software was used in the analysis of the data collected from the survey interviews and questionnaires. Descriptive statistics, frequency and percentage counts were then applied in refining the data further.

Results

The current study delved in investigating the methods/techniques used by teachers in Iraqi public schools in teaching English as a second language.

Table 2: Common Techniques used in teaching ESOL classes in Iraqi Public Schools

Category of teachers	'Repeat after me'	Audio Lingual	Memory
BA	44.34%	45.76%	38.76%
Others	64.76%	47.24%	65.72%

Table 3: Frequency measurement of ESOL teachings techniques

Technique	Usefulness
Discussions	Very Useful
Listening to Audio ESOL learning materials	Useful
Watching ESOL related materials	Useful
Grammar Translation Method	Very Useful
Role Play Activities	Useful

Discussion of Findings

The current study was undertaken to establish the methods employed by public high school in teaching ELT classes. The study narrowed down to answering the following research questions: (1) what are the main ESOL teaching strategies used in Iraqi public high schools. (2) What is the relationship between ESL teaching strategies and students' learning abilities? (3) Are

the methods used by different high school teachers in Iraqi high schools adequate in enhancing English learning? From the analysis of the survey interviews and questionnaires, it became evident that grammar translation methods and audio-lingual techniques are the most frequently used in by ESOL teachers in Iraqi public schools.

Concerning this, it is worth noting that the wide representation of the population makes this inference high probable. Apart from this, given that most Iraqi students face the challenge of inadequate English speaking or application environments, the nature of these ELT methods makes the very effective in enhancing Iraqi public high schools students' English language proficiency. Concerning the last research question, this study revealed that there are still gaps in determine the most effective ESOL teaching techniques, which can be inferred from table 3 teachers' favoring different methods of teaching based on their level of teaching training.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study here was set out to determine the strategies/techniques used by Iraqi public School teachers in teaching ESOL classes. The researchers selected 98 participants from different cities across Iraq, making this an effective population sample in answering the set research questions. Regarding the main purpose of the study, it was revealed that grammar translation and audio-lingual techniques are the most commonly used strategies used by teachers in teaching ESOL in Iraqi public schools. Other found to be common techniques found effective in boosting efficiency of English L2 teaching were listening to audio learning material, matching videos and role-playing. Overall, the study suggested that despite the frequency of the two common methods in teaching ESOL classes, various techniques should be employed to increase the proficiency of Iraqi teachers in teaching ELT classes in Iraqi public schools.

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