



Students' and Teachers' Perception of the Causes of Poor Academic Performance in English of Secondary Level Students in Rural Areas; A Case Study in Three Government Schools in Kandy District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This paper discusses the causes of poor academic performance in English language as a foreign language of secondary-level students in rural areas in Kandy district based on the students' and teachers' perceptions. The students from grades nine to eleven and respective English teachers from three different schools whose performances were reported to be weak for English in the ordinary level examination were selected. The study was carried out quantitatively. Data were collected by distributing questionnaires. According to the results, problems related to students, teachers, parents, learning environment, and curriculum were identified. Study findings illustrate that students' attitudes and low self-confidence, Lack of basic knowledge and vocabulary, poor parents' motivation, financial issues, disadvantageous social background, shortage of trained teachers, lack of facilities, unsuitable and inefficient teaching methods and curriculum are the major contributing factors for the lower English level of the secondary level students in rural areas.

Index Terms: Causes, English, Rural, Students.

1 INTRODUCTION

Among non-native English speakers, there is a strong belief that knowing English raises social status and prestige rather than using it as a language of communication. However, in Sri Lanka, people in rural areas still show lower levels of English proficiency. Also, students in unprivileged schools, show weaknesses in English proficiency when learning it as a second language regardless of the teachers' efforts [1]. Sinhala and Tamil are the two main languages used in Sri Lanka and English is the second language which has been used since the British colonial period [2].

After the independence in 1948, the major medium of instruction in schools is Sinhala and Tamil from primary to tertiary level education. Consequently, English became the second language subject in the general curriculum in schools. However, as a result of the reintroduction of bilingual education in 2002, around 584 schools in Sri Lanka, now conduct lessons on certain subjects in English medium while the rest of the subjects are taught in either Sinhala or Tamil [2].

The recent government allocated Rs.50 million to establish a training centre for English teachers in the 2018 budget to address the current need in English education. The previous government also announced to double the number of English teachers over the 2011—2020 period. In 2006, Sri Lanka reported having 16,800 English teachers and that number is increasing. According to the policy and curriculum of the National Committee on Education, 2009, 97, the official school timetable allocates 3 hours for Grade three, 3.5 hours for Grade five, and 3 hours and 20 minutes for Grades 6-11 to teach English per week. Schools can decide how they distribute this time of the week. The English curriculum derives from the General Education Reforms of 1997 [2]. All students in government schools follow the same textbook and workbook and these are distributed to every student cost-free annually. All teachers are given the teacher's guides.

In Sri Lanka general education system consist of different levels. First is the elementary level, which ranges from grades 1-5, followed by the junior secondary education level which ranges from grades 6-9. Next is

the first stage of senior secondary level which includes grades 10 and 11. The final sphere of the senior secondary level is the advanced level classes [3]. For this study, students from grades nine to eleven were selected. Advanced-level students were not included as they do not learn English at three of the schools where the study was conducted.

The majority of students in privileged schools and all the students in unprivileged schools follow the curriculum through their mother languages (Sinhala or Tamil) where English is taught as a second language [4]

There are external and internal factors affecting the students' performance in English language. Internal factors include curriculum, class size, facilities, learning environment, teachers' role, and teaching method. External classroom factors include extracurricular activities, parents' role, family background, economic level, and social and other problems [2].

According to the annual school census of Sri Lanka- summary report in 2021, there are 15 education zones in the central province while 6 are in Kandy district namely Kandy, Katugasthota, Gampola, Denuwara, Theldeniya, and Wategama. In Theldeniya education zone there are three education divisions (Minipe, Medadumbara, and Ududumbara) with 98 government schools [5].

According to the English language evaluation reports of the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (G.C.E O/L) examination conducted by the Department of Examinations in Sri Lanka, from 2011 to 2019, the percentages of students who got weak (W) passes or failed the English language is above 50% in the Theldeniya education zone in Kandy district (figure 1 and 2). It is a higher failure rate when compared with other subjects and other educational zones in Kandy district. According to that data, we can identify the Students' performance in the English Language has been poor in Theldeniya zone which has been a question generally asked by teachers, parents, and even students. With examining statistical data further, it was identified that these failure rates are increased by the schools in rural areas compared to urban and suburban schools in the zone.

Even though, there are many studies have been carried out on this regard in several parts of the country, for the first time, this study was conducted in Kandy district. The objective of this study is to investigate the causes of poor performance in English language of students based on the students' and English language teachers' perceptions.

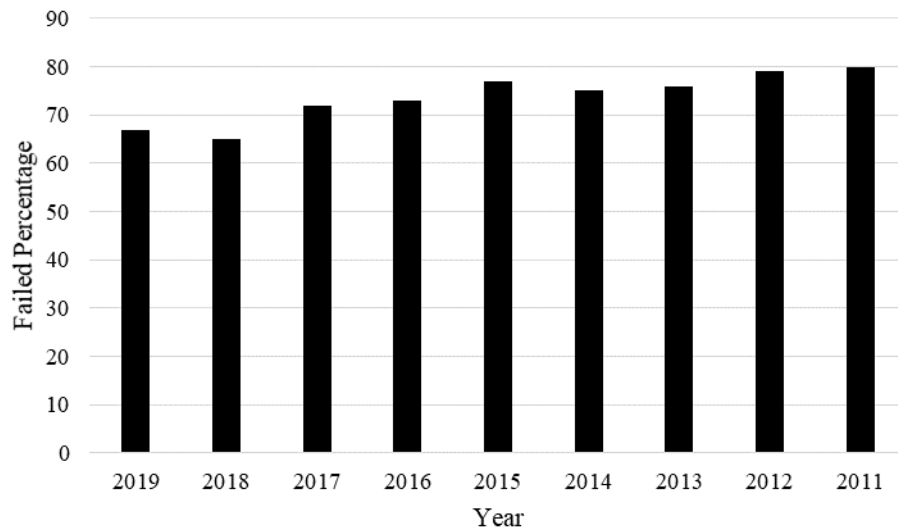


Fig. 1 Students' Achievement in English in particular education zone in Kandy district

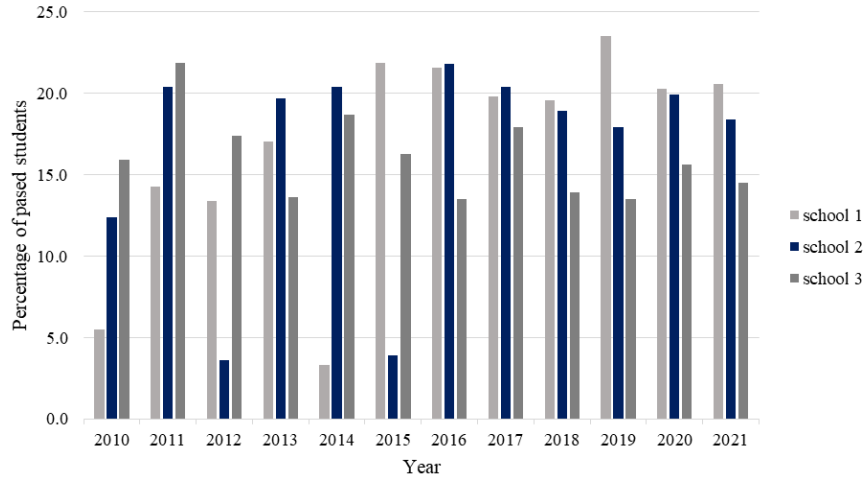


Fig. 2 Students' Achievement in English in O/L examination of the three schools the study conducted.

2 Literature review

English plays a key role in Sri Lanka but still English proficiency level of many students in rural areas is far from satisfactory level. According to a recent labor demand survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics, the major barrier to the employability of Sri Lankan graduates in the private sector, is the Lack of English proficiency. Although it has been a key social policy of successive governments of Sri Lanka, to teach English as a second language to all school children since the early 1950s, according to the data, English literacy is just 22% among the Sri Lankan population above 15 years of age [4].

In Sri Lanka, English has been a compulsory second language in all schools from grade 3 since the 1940s and is being taught for 10-13 years at schools. But it has failed to give the ability to communicate in English effectively or to be equipped with language skills resulting in a decline in the quality of higher education [6]. It is apparent that, in rural areas, the majority of the students don't even have the basic knowledge. In Sri Lanka, the largest number of candidates sit for the G.C.E. (O.L.) Examination conducted at the national level is used not only to select individuals for higher education but also to secure medium-level jobs. It is also considered as a basic requirement to follow certain courses of study in International Universities.

In Sri Lanka, all the schools follow a common curriculum prepared by the Department of English of the National Institute of Education (NIE). Although English is taught from grade 1, the significance given differs at different levels. The secondary school level (Grades six to eleven), the English language curriculum mainly is based on textbooks by which reading and writing skills are aimed to be developed. At the secondary level, the main focus of schools is to prepare students for the O/L examination in grade eleven [7].

As with other subjects, the proficiency level of English is being assessed through regular assessments and term tests conducted at the zonal, provincial, and national levels. However, one of the current problems in the education sector of public interest is the poor level of achievement especially in the English language. Understanding the importance of the English language to enhance educational attainment as well as to improve the communication ability of citizens, the government has made it a core subject.

According to the Department of Examination statistics, even though the average percentage of failed students of English in Kandy district remains below 50%, the percentages of several educational zones in Kandy are reported to be higher than 60%.

Literature regarding the factors affecting the weak performances of children in English as a second language is abundantly available. For this purpose, studies done in Sri Lanka, India, Japan, Malaysia, and Laos were reviewed. All these countries try to increase their English proficiency level, realizing the importance of English as a global tool of communication. Though research has been done in different contexts, many of the challenges identified by researchers seem to be common among many learners.

As Fernando, 2015 [8] indicates, poor family background, unsupportive attitudes of parents, unfamiliar

teaching methods and rural environment are the challenging facts in learning English. McKay, 2002 [9] states “English is not a subject which can be taught; it is a subject which must be learned” emphasizing the importance of learner-centered education.

A study done in Nepal shows the lack of well-trained English teachers and poor infrastructure facilities are the major hindrance to learn English [10]. He further mentions, “English is taught as a subject not as the language” which negatively affects the performance of students since younger ages.

A study done in Malaysia reveals that communication in the classroom becomes ineffective when students and the teachers are at a different level of understanding where the teachers fail to convey messages effectively [4] and because of that, students think English is impossible them to learn [11], [12].

Moreover, among many Japanese students, lack of self-confidence, and negative attitudes toward foreign languages create demotivation. According to many studies, academic achievements depend on the level of motivation [10]. Hence motivation has a great impact on the extent that a certain language is learned. Students’ weakness in English is caused by their laziness, the inefficiency of the teachers, and insufficient parents’ encouragement.

According to the data, many of the children in schools in urban areas show a higher capability of using English well compared to the students in rural areas. Majorly schools in urban areas particularly have sufficient numbers of English teachers and they also get more opportunities to learn English regularly. This helps them not only to learn the language but also to get rid of their shyness and fear of speaking English [7]. On the contrary, children in rural areas encounter different experiences. According to the studies done in the past, four main areas in which the problems lie have been identified namely, issues with students and social context, issues related to the learning environment (the classroom and the school), issues with the curriculum, and the issues regarding teachers.

3 Research Methodology

This study used a descriptive research design to investigate the students' and teachers' perceptions with regard to English language performance. The study was conducted based on secondary level students from grades nine to eleven who scored less than 40% in three consecutive term tests (third term test in 2021, first, and second in 2022) in three government schools in Theldeniya education zone, Kandy District in Sri Lanka. Three schools were selected from each education division namely, Minipe, Medadumbara, and Ududumbara. The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire and interviews, adapted from previous research. The questionnaire was distributed to the students from grades nine to eleven in that particular three schools. There were altogether 427 students (41.56% boys and 58.44% girls). From the three schools ten English teaching teachers participated.

According to census reports, there are 652 schools in Kandy District and 98 schools in Theldeniya education zone. The selected schools are located in rural areas in Theldeniya zone in Kandy District with a highest percentages of failures in English for G.C.E O/L continuously. The selected schools represent both genders.

The questionnaire was based upon fixed alternative questions or the closed type of questions and the students were provided with a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to Strongly Agree), Ranging from 1 to 5. Secondary data was collected from previous studies. In the first stage, a sample questionnaire was given to a sample of 25 students to find out the effectiveness of the questions. Students were observed in their classrooms while they were answering the questions. The feedback received by the researcher was neutral therefore, certain questions were included in the final questionnaire and some were omitted.

All participants were asked to answer these questions individually. The questions and answers were written in Sinhala, as those are Sinhala medium schools. The participants were requested to refrain from writing their identities but basic demographic profiles (gender, parents’ level of education, and occupation) were collected. Teachers were asked to give the facts in detail. Then all answers were collected and analyzed. Open in-depth interviews were conducted to illustrate respondents’ perspectives more and telephone conversations with parents were made when necessary. Each answer was then translated into English. During this process, both teachers and students came up with several comments which were also noted by the researcher.

4 Results and discussion

After analyzing the answers major factors were identified and those are discussed here. Those factors can be grouped into four categories as issues related to students, teachers, parents, learning environment, and curriculum.

Table 1. Percentages of students' on each issues identified	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %
English is viewed as a difficult subject to learn	12.9%	48.0	25.5	13.6	-
Lack of Interest of students	25.9	28.6	21.9	12.7	10.9
Limited vocabulary	20.2	41.8	18.2	16.2	3.6
Lack of self-confidence	39.9	43.8	4.5	6.8	5.0
Shortage of English teachers	27.1	34.9	17.3	10.9	9.8
Lack of Resources	46.4	29.1	14.5	5.5	4.5
Don't like the teaching methods using so far	43.6	35.5	11.8	5.5	3.6
Exam-oriented curriculum	25.9	41.8	4.1	14.5	13.6
The teachers in some cases are strict	8.2	3.6	22.7	21.8	43.6
Lack of Provision of Tuitions or Extra-Classes	9.1	10.9	17.3	29.8	32.9
Using mother tongue during English teaching	42.7	41.8	5.5	6.4	4.5
Lack of exposure to English language	56.2	26.4	15.4	2.0	-

Issues related to students

1. English is viewed as a difficult subject

The majority of the students (12.9% strongly agreed and 48% agreed) stated English is a difficult language to learn. While 100% of the teachers claimed that the internalization of this idea makes it more difficult as students do not make any attempts to learn and understand it. These negative attitudes are more encouraged by English term test marks they get.

2. Lack of basic knowledge

All the teachers who participated in the study claimed that children don't get basic knowledge during their primary education from grades 3-5. Recent research reveals that there are more than adequate English teachers in Sri Lanka, with an excess of subject-qualified ones (with a university degree in English or with special training to teach English). But most of these qualified English teachers are concentrated in privileged schools where there are more than enough and are deficient only in underprivileged schools. So students from rural primary schools lack chances to gain basic English knowledge which affects them in the long term. Moreover, primary education gives more priority to the grade five scholarship exam which exacerbates the issue.

3. Lack of Interest of students

Previous exam results, directly demotivate students. Most of the time schools in rural areas are located in socially disadvantaged contexts where the education is considered as unimportant. There, as girls have to eventually get married once, it is important for them to gain skills in household chores whereas boys have to get jobs after their father which usually doesn't need English at all in their context. So, the majority of the students show a lack of interest in learning English. All the teachers and the majority of the students (25.9% strongly agreed and 28.6% agreed) mentioned that students are not interested in the subject.

4. Limited vocabulary

Children will be more confident in speaking and writing in English if they have a wide range of vocabulary. Students will be discouraged when they cannot express their thoughts. Hence, an enhanced vocabulary improves the student's confidence and motivation to practice the language more. In this study, 100% of the teachers and 62% of the students agreed on this.

5. Lack of self-confidence

Students feel afraid and shame when they make mistakes while reading and speaking. 83.7% of the students and 100% of the teachers agreed that fear and shame are challenging.

Problems related to Parents and social background

1. Lack of parents' encouragement and unsupportive family background

Compared to the children in urban societies, children in rural areas receive less support and encouragement from their parents and families. People in poor socio-economic backgrounds always believe in fatalism. They believe that English is for high-class society and they are not good enough. Previous studies suggest that students from disadvantageous backgrounds had negative attitudes towards their abilities which had affected their academic achievements in longer terms [13], [14]. In this study, 80% of the teachers claimed that family background and not having proper and strong encouragement from parents, increases the lower performance of students.

2. Poverty

Families with low income levels struggle not only to provide education to their children but also to meet the basic needs of the family in this area. Sri Lankan government provides free education to all, but still poor families have difficulties in giving money for stationery, transportation and other expenses that comes along with education. So the benefits are limited to wealthy families. On the other hand, children from poor families engage in household chores from an early age leading to a loss of interest in studying and ultimately to dropping out of school. Hence, poverty is a critical factor in Sri Lanka that triggers nearly 80% of school drop-outs. There are certain occasions parents encourage boys to study to get a paid job. But when poverty strikes the family, male children go for full-time jobs [1], [15]. With regard to the particular schools, even though teachers mentioned this as a significant fact, only 26.4% of students accepted poverty affects their enthusiasm towards English.

3. Opportunities to earn money

As a result of having job opportunities within the community such as farming, river sand mining, fishing, carpentry, masonry, painting and other sort of laboring or hired work, children at an early age attract towards some kind of employment. However, after children start to earn money at younger ages, they are unlikely to devote time for studies again [7]. In this study teachers declared, there are several incidents where students drop out of school for menial jobs available in the surroundings. It is most common in the 14-19 age group and at least 7.8% from each class from grade nine to thirteen have dropped out of school.

4. Parental lack of understanding of the importance of English

Lack of understanding of the illiterate parents about the importance of learning English naturally discourages their children. Such parents do not support learning English as they want their children to continue what they do for living. Such students have the least interest in studying especially English who not only pay less attention but also disturb others in the classroom. It was noted in this study that parents of students with lower performance in English, had lower education levels and give less encouragement.

5. Lack of English language exposure in social contexts

In terms of a pedagogical view, language exposure is important for learning a language [16]. Being Sinhala and Tamil the frequently speaking languages in Sri Lanka, children are largely exposed to non-English environments outside the classroom. Mendis, D. & Rambukwella, H., 2010 [17], found that the majority of Sri Lankans do not use English for any communication [18]. Here, 82.6 % of the students mentioned, do not have exposure to the language at all besides in the English period in school and in private classes.

6. Overcrowded classrooms

All the teachers stated that overcrowded classrooms affect the efficiency of teaching. Students have unequal levels of understanding and ways of learning. But teachers cannot reach them all within 40 minutes since there are many students in one classroom. Moreover, they mentioned that the allocated time (3 hours and 20 minutes per week) is not enough. Many students need more time and attention while learning as they get exposed to the language only during the English periods since many do not attend private classes [18].

Problems related to teachers

1. Shortage of English teachers

Lack of competent English teachers particularly in rural schools is a major issue. But the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Sri Lanka [5] did not agree with this and reported that there were 20,513 English teachers in the country that is sufficient for to all the schools. Further the MoE [5] mentioned that there is no shortage of English teachers but there is a problem with their management and it has worsened by female English teachers as they were going on maternity leave [16], [19]. All the teachers and a larger portion of the students stated that there is an urgent need of new recruitments.

2. Dissatisfaction of the job

Moreover, teachers unwillingness to work in remote areas, unequal distribution of qualified teachers among the schools, underpayments for teachers, lack of incentives, political interferences in recruiting, transferring issues, unawareness of the number of teachers needed in certain rural areas, and poor coordination among educational sectors cause the shortage of English teachers in remote areas [16]. When teachers get appointed to work with students who lack interest in learning the subject no matter how hard they work, generally teachers get discouraged. Additionally, workload one teacher has to do in the school apart from teaching, having to teach many classes, and working for a longer time in the same school, increasing the cost of living including the increased transportation expenses compared to teachers who work in nearby schools are several issues that enhance the dissatisfaction of the job. All the teachers stated that they have been working for more than 5 years in the same remote area and now fed up with the job.

Problems related to the learning environment

1. Lack of Resources

It is apparent that the facilities and resources are less in rural schools compared to urban schools. It is vital to make use of different teaching aids to enhance the understanding of a subject. If schools have deprived of poor resources for learning, the children who depend on the facilities and provisions provided by schools will be left with no other option to learn the language [7]. 46.4% of students strongly agreed that they prefer more resources and those will increase their interest in the subject.

2. Overuse of mother tongue during English learning and teaching

According to a study done by Karunarathne, 2008 [14], teachers use their mother tongue more often to teach English at rural schools. In Sri Lanka, the use of the mother language by students and teachers in the classroom creates a comfort zone for both sides. English is not given priority in communication as they use Sinhala or Tamil effectively [10], [17]. More than 80% of the students prefer using Sinhala while teaching by the instructor.

Problems related to the curriculum

1. Different Levels of Students' Learning Abilities

Students generally have varied language learning abilities and capacities. Heterogeneous Students are grouped together in one class room and similar teaching strategies and syllabus are applied to the whole group. Hence, effective learning of language does not take place [18]. In this study, 43.6% strongly agreed and 35.5% agreed making up the majority of the students who stated that they don't like the teaching methods. Moreover, in the comment section of the questionnaire, 46% of the total student population had mentioned, they don't understand what is being taught.

2. Exam-oriented curriculum

In teaching English text books and the syllabus are followed by the teachers. During the secondary education in Sri Lanka, the main objective of the schools is to prepare students for G.C.E. O/L Examination (final exam for secondary school) conducted in all provinces of the country by the Department of Examination, Sri Lanka. So teachers try only to finish the syllabus on time rushing through the textbooks

and focusing on improving the reading and writing skills which are assessed in the national examination. Therefore ultimately, students have completed the English language curriculums throughout six years at schools without developing communicative skills in English. 62.5% of teachers and the majority of the students (strongly agree= 25.9%, agree= 41.8%) proved this is true [7].

The importance of having professional, qualified English teachers and not replacing their shortage with non-professionals was suggested by 50% of the teachers who are trained English teachers. Teachers must have enough necessary knowledge and skills to teach a subject [7]. Language proficiency, and using techniques properly are vital in teaching a language. As a teacher, he/she must be able to implement modern and innovative methods in teaching, managing discipline, guiding everyone in the classroom, and adopting new activities. Sometimes, teachers are strict. Even though it was not a prominent fact in this study, few participants highlighted the strictness of teachers caused to dislike the subject.

Furthermore, 80% of the teachers claimed, students engage in extracurricular activities beyond the limit reduces the interest and the time to learn.

5 Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to determine the factors affecting secondary-level students' lower English performance as a second language in rural areas in Kandy district by analyzing the students', and teachers' perceptions. According to the study and literature, major sections in which problems lie were identified. There are issues related to students, teachers, parents, the learning environment, and the curriculum of government schools. According to the findings, the majority of the students have a solid idea that English is a difficult "subject". Due to the shortage of teachers, the majority of the students lack the basic knowledge that should be given during primary education. Lack of self-confidence to use English because of fear and shame, lack of resources, Limited vocabulary, Exam-oriented learning, and unsuitable curriculum, lack of exposure in the social context, and weak teaching strategies can be depicted as the major facts.

Unsupportive parents and poor family background, overcrowded class rooms, Excessive dependence on mother tongue, giving more priority for extracurricular activities and lack of professionals and no-satisfaction with the teaching career were highlighted by majority of the English language teachers. Apparently young schoolers in rural areas have more pressing challenges that hinder the process of learning English.

6 Significance of the study

Even though, the perceptions of few students' and teachers' cannot be generalized to all the schools in Kandy area, this study illustrates important information regarding the factors having a negative impact on English language learning in government schools in Sri Lanka. This study hopefully may encourage students to improve their language, motivate other investigators, encourage the school administration to make necessary amendments to develop teaching strategies, and motivate the teachers for better performance.

7 Limitations of the study

There are certain limitations of this study. The sample size taken for the study is relatively small. Secondly, data taken from this cannot be generalized for all the rural schools within the zone and district. Three government schools were selected due to the time factor and other practical issues. The biggest issue related to the data collection was, some students were reluctant to provide 100% honest opinions about their school and teachers. Also, their perceptions were influenced by parents and peers, some students, especially boys, were not serious about the study, and some did not seem to have a clear opinion regarding some questions.

Recommendations

This study suggests that the teachers and the administration should consider gathering information on problems in the learning and teaching process at government schools. Since students are considered the most important group in the education system, their perceptions should be valued. However, teachers can be observed by the school authorities. Conducting an island-wide survey to identify the issues, designing an English language curriculum suitable for daily life regardless teacher centered exam-oriented teaching,

integration of technology, the establishment of proper management to ensure the equal and fair distribution of teachers all over the country, taking relevant measures to increase the job satisfaction of the teachers, providing facilities to the unprivileged schools are the suggestions given by the researcher. Solving the issues mentioned here can help all the students in disadvantaged society to be competent in English.

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