

A Comparative Study of Proficiency in Speaking and Writing among EFL Learners in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Learning of English as a foreign language is an imperative reality in a world largely shrinking with the advent of various revolutions, both socio-political and economic. However, it is seen that foreign language acquisition, especially of English, leaves a great deal to be desired as the learners so far in the geographical area of our study, i.e., Saudi Arabia, have failed to achieve native like fluency with the current teaching-learning practices. This raises questions as to the policies adopted vis-à-vis curriculum, pedagogy and most importantly, the stage at which foreign language learning is introduced in Saudi Arabia. The current study has undertaken an in-depth review of the available literature, which is followed up with modern testing methods to arrive at conclusions. It witnesses a dichotomy between speaking and writing abilities of college level young learners. The trend is towards a higher score on writing-ability tests as compared to the oral language proficiency tests. Thus a major communicative drawback is faced by the 'products' of this system of education, and numerous causes and remedies are suggested herein.

Keywords: English language acquisition, English language teaching, speaking, writing

Introduction

English is the only foreign language taught from 4th grade through the first year in college, in Saudi Arabia. Hence, all Saudi students would have studied English for at least nine years. This lengthy experience in English made the students able to demonstrate grammatical knowledge on a discrete-point grammar examination very well, but most of them lack the ability to speak English accurately and fluently. As Rao (2002) reports, students who have studied English for several years have gained knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, can read well, and get high marks in English exams. However, they lack good training in English listening and speaking skills; they are unable to use English for communication in their daily lives.

Students' poor level of English proficiency has raised many concerns about English education in Saudi Arabia. A lot of attempts to promote students' communicative competence should be considered. These attempts have led to a real change in the methods of teaching to shift from a focus on receptive skills and knowledge, such as grammar and reading comprehension, to an emphasis on productive skills, such as speaking and writing. Moreover, the major English language teaching methodology should have changed from the traditional grammar-translation approach to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a language teaching methodology which focuses on developing learners' communicative competence in the target language.

According to Noam Chomsky (1986), there is an inherent ability in children when they are born to learn any human language. This is borne by the fact that children are able to use some linguistic structures accurately right from the time they begin to utter words which logically points to their 'being' there in their minds. Chomsky has propagated the widely accepted belief that every child has a Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This imprints the primary principles of a language along with related grammatical structures onto the child's brain. As children pick up new words from the environment, they team them up with these previously acquired syntactic structures to form meaningful sentences. If we argue that children learn a language by way of imitation alone, we would be soon proven wrong as all individuals around them may not produce identical language. Moreover, adults often speak in broken phrases and may not always be 'grammatically' correct! In any case the rapid rate at which children acquire a language cannot be attributed to imitation alone.

According to Chomsky's theory, children appear to be 'hard-wired' to acquire the grammar. This has also been named as the 'Universal Grammar' as it is a principle that is universal to all languages as they are made of the same components: nouns, verbs, vowels and consonants etc. In addition to this, every language has a rich repertoire of subtleties and nuances, which may often be very complex. Regardless of these and many other hurdles that a language is replete with, every child becomes a fluent speaker of the native language by the time they reach five or six years of age.

There are, however, stages of language acquisition even in these early years. Jean Aitchison (1997), the well-known British linguist says that these stages may vary from one individual to another, 'but there is little variation in the sequence of language learning'. Even in different environments language development in children follows a common pattern. It is also true that the child acquires 'receptive' language ability much before the 'expressive', that is, cognition comes much before production of language. By the end of these stages, the child has a rich lexicon of some thousands of words that have been 'acquired'. 'Learning' of new elements of language now takes on an active role in the child's experience.

As regards the learning of a foreign language by the child, as Montessori (1948) says, the child can learn a number of languages if the languages are in his environment at birth. The sounds of any language keep their purity age after age; their complexities are taken in by the child's sub-conscious mind as easily as simplicities. No child becomes sick of learning to speak.

Coming to the issue of bilingualism or foreign language acquisition, children learn a second or a third language for that matter as naturally and are able to use it as accurately and fluently as they do the mother tongue given they are sufficiently exposed to its 'sounds' early, as frequently and as naturally. This is so for two reasons: one, the universal grammar equips them to acquire an additional language easily; and two, there are no prejudices to interfere or inhibit the learning of a language other than the mother tongue. These very factors become impediments when adults have to develop proficiency in a language other than the native.

American psycholinguist Lenneberg (1967) put forward the Critical Age Hypothesis for language acquisition in adults. This draws from what the biologists studying the origin of species-specific behaviour proposed: if a fledgling was to develop normally, there were periods when a specific type of stimulus was needed. The critical age hypothesis states that 'changes in language acquisition ability are linked to stages in brain maturation'. Studies have shown that starting at about two years, language skills begin to be limited in the left hemisphere of the brain. This process, known as lateralization, seems to be completed at about the time of puberty. Thus for some reason, puberty seems to mark the point in time when a young adult's ability to acquire a new language will wane!

This also explains why, in comparison to a child of even poor intellect, an adult is not gifted in the ability to acquire a language. At the same time it is true that some adults achieve almost native like fluency in a foreign language owing to various factors while others may still produce a speech marred by a foreign accent even after years of use of the language. In addition, some adults possess an extraordinary aptitude for learning a language even after the critical age! Thus, adult language learning ability may be a factor of special talent(s), meaning thereby that all adults may not show the same results in constant language-learning situation. Some adults may be gifted with ability for phonetic mimicry, a natural talent to be able to reproduce the accents or voices of others. This may stand them in a good stead when required to learn a new language.

Good memory also comes into play when adults attempt learning a new or foreign language. Related vocabulary and grammatical structures and rules thereof will come to them more readily and naturally, marking them as 'fluent' users. This, of course, is an inborn talent that remains outside the purview of 'learned' behaviour.

Although there do seem to be differences in the ability of individual adults to learn a foreign language, it is equally true that given enough time and opportunity for practice, any adult of reasonable ability can learn a foreign language and be able to communicate in it. The degree of fluency, however, will be open to question and differ from one individual to another. This is so because native like fluency is not just a matter of accent, but also of many minor characteristics such as the selection of words, tone, and even structures! Not to discourage the learner, motivation is an important factor in language learning, and societies that praise or emphasize the value of multilingualism will increase the motivation level of learners and thus increase the success of foreign language learning in general.

Literature Review

While learning the first language is an inevitable process, learning of a foreign language is a special accomplishment. Only a few succeed in mastering a foreign language. There are scores of reasons for this. The foreign language learner is one who has had the experience of another (mother tongue). He tries to learn the foreign language the way he acquired the first language but finds that the environment and the surroundings in which he acquired his mother tongue (first language) are not available for him now. He now tries to learn consciously.

Mackey (1965, p. 108) writes: “the learning of the first language follows the same pattern for every one”, “the learning of the second language can take on a variety of patterns”. Second language learning is greatly affected by linguistic, social, and psychological factors. Besides the linguistic and social factors, there are some psychological factors, which affect the process and progress of second language learning. These psychological factors include age, motive, native skill, intelligence and personality, auditory memory span, intention, or readiness to learn, emotion and drive.

Lado (1971, p. 32) says, “Learning a second language is more than learning a description of it. The process of speaking and listening is involved, and this process combines linguistic and psychological as well as other elements”. He defines the second language learning as, “acquiring the ability to use its structure within a general vocabulary under essentially the conditions of normal communication among native speakers at conversational speed” (Lado, 1971, p. 38).

Ellis (2009) investigates what learners do when exposed to the L2 in communicative settings. In such circumstances, some L2 learners, particularly if they are children undergo a silent period. That is, they do not attempt to say anything to begin with. This silent period may serve as a preparation for subsequent productivity. When learners do begin to speak in the L2 their speech is likely to manifest ‘formulaic chunks’: fixed expressions like ‘How do you do?’ figure very prominently in early L2 learning. Further, early L2 speech is ‘propositionally simplified’, i.e., learners find it difficult to speak full sentences so they frequently leave out words.

According to Finocchiaro (1994), childhood, as the literature indicates, is considered the most favourable period for laying a solid foundation for oral fluency. It is also the formative period in which nascent prejudices can be eradicated. She says further that children should learn to understand and to speak the foreign language with reasonable accuracy and fluency in the situations within which and about which children of their age group normally speak. Finocchiaro is of the opinion that the elementary school programme should also develop in children the ability to read and write what they have learned to say. The degree to which the reading and writing skills are developed will vary from community to community. All communities, however, should initiate reading and writing activities after a reasonable period of purely audio-oral activity.

According to Montessori (1948), “Scientific observers in Belgium noted the fact that, whereas at two-and-a half, the child knew only two hundred words, at five, (s)he knew and used thousands – and all without a teacher”. Psychologists say that three-year old children must have found it easy to speak and understand. Language in children is developed, not taught. Language comes naturally, as a spontaneous creation, and to a striking degree, its development follows definite laws, and in certain epochs reaches heights; this is true for all children whether the language of their race is simple or complex. There is a period for children when only syllables are spoken; then another period when words are spoken (of more than one syllable). Ultimately, the whole syntax and grammar seem to be grasped, gender and number, case, tense, and mode. The child having cultured environment learns the language fast and correctly.

According to Willis (1981, p. 134), listening involves the formation of proper auditory images of phonemic components such as the use of vowel and consonant sounds, stress, accent, pitch, pause, juncture, intonation and rhythm of language in isolation and in combination as well as, in foreign language context, reception, identification, perception and their discrimination from mother-tongue equivalents, and acquisition or development of communicative competence at the receptive level.

According to Munby (1978), speaking involves articulation of all the components and development of communicative competence at the productive level. Baruah (1985) has mentioned the relevant components of writing; he calls writing as a complex skill. These components are writing of letters of alphabet at reasonable speed, spelling the words correctly, recalling appropriate words and putting them in sentences, using appropriate punctuation marks, using sentence-connectors and sequence signals (e.g. pronouns, definite articles, etc.), organizing thoughts and ideas in logical sequence, and so on.

According to Smith (1961), “Teaching is a system of actions intended to induce learning”. We know that in India, English is taught as both a foreign language and second language. Teachers have, therefore, to make great efforts to induce learning with proper pronunciation/accent and perspective.

Studies in the region have, however, shown that early exposure helps to tackle the problems usually associated with learning English as a foreign language. Whereas Arabic is taught to the students right from the beginner level, English alphabet is introduced as late as the fourth grade. This is the pubertal age when language learning ability is on the wane among students (Critical Age Hypothesis) and resistance to learning a foreign language increases manifold for various reasons discussed in this article. Early exposure further needs to be coupled with ICT to enable the learners to acquire native like fluency. This means that pedagogical issues need to be touched upon: teachers need to be trained in the use of the latest softwares and programmes that will equip them to deliver their best.

With these theories in the background, the authors conducted an empirical research, which was both descriptive and analytical in nature. The hypothesis with which we started comprised the following questions pertaining to output in English language in young adults: undergraduate level students in Saudi Arabia, a non-English speaking state.

Research Questions

The authors tried to answer the following research questions:

1. If a child has a natural instinct to acquire language(s) – not only the mother-tongue but also other languages in the first five years of life provided they are present in the environment, does it underline the need to teach English as Foreign/Second Language at the elementary level?
2. Does one have the ability to learn speaking and writing of English as a foreign language in a similarly natural and spontaneous (or intuitive) way as the mother tongue in childhood?
3. Does the age/stage when English language speaking and writing as foreign language is introduced in the schools have a bearing on its acquisition?
4. Has cultural background a role to play in learning English as a foreign language, which is reflected in the hesitation in the college students in speaking English as second or foreign language?
5. Is fear one of the inhibiting factors in an adult to learn speaking and writing English language as foreign language which appears to him/her a strange language, not present in the home environment?
6. Does prejudice against English as a foreign language act as an inhibiting factor with young adults for speaking and writing in English?
7. Will modern tools help in learning English as foreign language more easily?

Methodology

Population and Sampling: The population for the study consisted of students of English in KSA public colleges where English is taught as a foreign language. The sample has been drawn by convenience sampling method. It was ensured that the sample was adequately representative of the characteristics of the population. The sample size was 90 participants (80 students, 8 teachers and 2 Heads of Department from KSA). The sample included 70 male students; ten female students from different levels of the fourth year MA Course, two teachers were male out of eight; one Head of the Department was male and the other was female.

Empirical Data: The study was based on empirical data gathered by the researchers for the purpose, for which suitable questionnaires were prepared including a schedule for taking interviews of English teachers and Heads of Departments. A suitable test to assess the Speaking and Writing abilities/skills of the sample-college students was administered. For the purpose of gathering data for speaking (communication skills), the services of teachers of other colleges were hired; they were asked to assess/evaluate the answer sheets. Different teachers conducted oral communication skills tests and evaluation of answer sheets. The researcher supervised the entire exercise and conducted interviews himself. Statistical tools and graphs were used for analyzing the data.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in different ways. It will help in the following aspects:

- Technology and changing economic needs have made the world a smaller place. This has brought peoples of the world closer than ever before. Consequently, adopting an ‘international’ language has become inevitable. With two thirds of the world being ruled by the Europeans at one time, English seems to be the natural choice as the common language of trade and diplomacy.
- The place and role of the native language cannot be overlooked: this implies a demand for bilingual or trilingual personnel in business and government organisations.
- Skilled language teachers are required to develop an adequate language competency in the people who will be needed to meet the growing demand for a workforce that can use this language well.
- There is consensus to-day that proficiency in all the four language skills in English (LSRW) is essential for effective communication. An example that illustrates this is the case of participants in international conferences who are at a great disadvantage if not fluent in English.
- The ability to understand (listening with meaning), speak and write as well as to read and write, cannot be acquired at the desirable level in the secondary (or senior secondary) schools, where this subject has been offered from 5th class onwards in the majority of communities up to now.
- A longer exposure to the language is essential in order to develop reasonable competence in the language skills. Since many of the senior school students may not enter college, prolonged early exposure will have to be achieved by starting the study of the foreign language in the elementary schools.
- Childhood is the ideal period for acquiring a native or near native pronunciation. Medical evidence, experimentation, and objective observation have proved conclusively that children learn foreign languages more quickly and more accurately (at least as far as pronunciation is concerned) than adolescents or adults because of the flexibility of their speech organs, absence of any inhibitions that are typical of older persons learning a language coupled with their physiological and psychological need to communicate with other children (peer level).
- The current emphasis on understanding and speaking the language and on developing cultural pluralism requires new approaches, materials, and teaching skills. Teachers’ role to-day, at least at the elementary level, is to engage pupils in pleasurable, varied practice so that their understanding and speaking, and later, their reading and writing of the target foreign language will be natural and habitual.
- Indisputably, English language is one of the richest languages in the world, as far as the literature and culture is concerned, and its inclusion in any curriculum will only enhance the learners’ knowledge base and level of consciousness.
- Finally, the results of the study would help the teachers, college authorities and policy makers to reconsider the efficacy of the approaches, methods, tools and equipment in use and/or introduction of modern methods of teaching English as a foreign language in a more interesting way.

Findings

Table 1: Group Frequency of Students Scores in Speaking and Writing Tests out of 100

No	Category	Class (Scores)	No. of students	Speaking scores (%)	Writing scores (%)
1	1	71-100	12	15	24
2	2	61-70	16	20	29
3	3	51-60	24	30	18
4	4	41-50	20	25	20
5	5	0-40	8	10	10

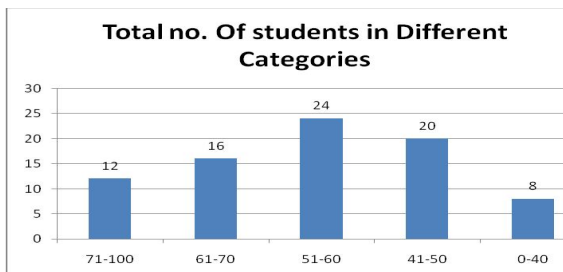


Figure 3 Writing scores in different categories

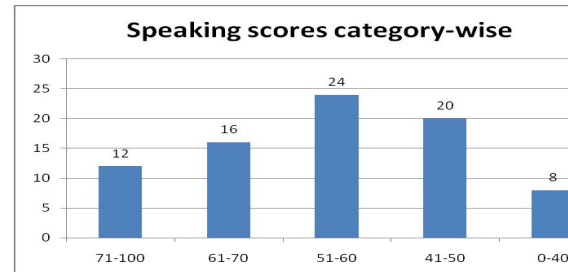


Figure 4 Speaking and Writing

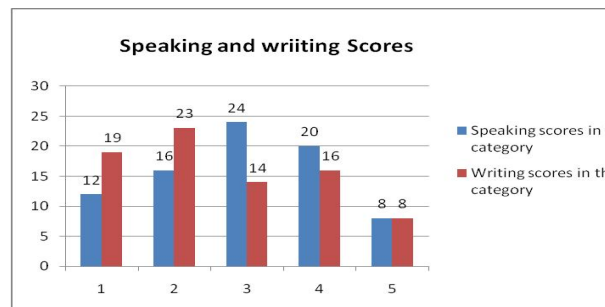
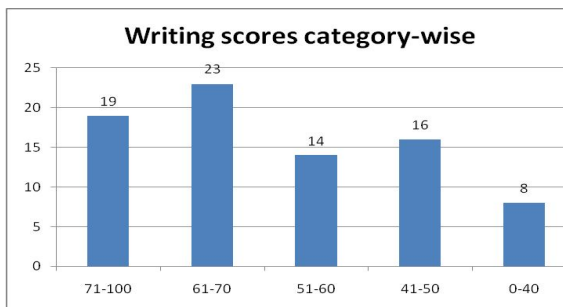


Table 2 Group Frequency of Students Scores in Speaking and moved to category of Writing

No	Category	Class (Scores) Speaking	No of Students	Moved to category of Writing				
				1	2	3	4	5
1	1	71-100	12	1	2	4	4	1
2	2	61-70	16	5	5	2	2	2
3	3	51-60	24	4	5	4	7	4
4	4	41-50	20	7	9	2	2	0
5	5	0-40	8	7	9	2	2	0

Figure 5: Shows frequencies of student moving from speaking category to Writing

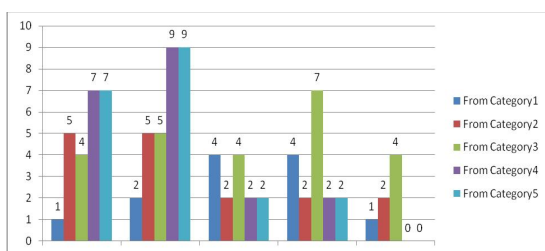


Table 3 Shows frequencies of student moving from speaking category to Writing category

Moved to →	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4	Category 5
From Category 1	1	2	4	4	1
From Category 2	5	5	2	2	2
From Category 3	4	5	4	7	4
From Category 4	7	9	2	2	0
From Category 5	7	9	2	2	0

Figure 6 Shows frequencies of student moving from writing category to Speaking category

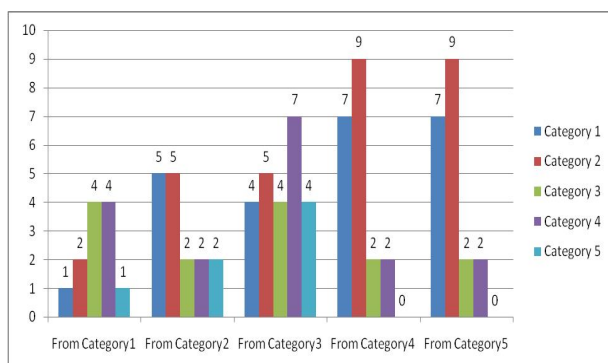


Table 4 Shows frequencies of student moving from speaking category to Writing category

Moved to ↓	From Category 1	From Category 2	From Category 3	From Category 4	From Category 5
Category 1	1	5	4	7	7
Category 2	2	5	5	9	9
Category 3	4	2	4	2	2
Category 4	4	2	7	2	2
Category 5	1	2	4	0	0

None of the students secured equal marks in speaking (oral test) and writing out of 100 in each test. They were classified in five groups as under, based upon the marks secured by them: 70 and above, between 61 and 70, between 51 and 60, between 41 and 50, below 40. There were 12 students in category (1) for speaking; the number improved to 19 in writing (from 15% to 23.75% of the total 80 students). There were 16 students in category (2); the number increased to 23 in writing (from 20% to 28.75% out of total of 80 students). There were 24 students in category (3); the number decreased to 14 in writing (from 30% to 17.50% out of a total of 80 students). There were 20 students in category (4); the number decreased to 16 in writing (from 25% to 20.50% out of a total of 80 students). There were 10 students in category (5); the number remained the same, that is, 8 in both speaking and writing (no increase or decrease).

Out of 12 students in the top category (1) for speaking, one remained in category (1); two came down by one stage to category (2); four came down to category (3); four came down to category (4); and one joined the bottom rank category (category 5) of writing.

Out of 16 students in the category (2) for speaking, five moved up to category (1) of writing (1): they improved their position/performance; five retained their category (2); out of the remaining six, 2 each slipped to categories (3), (4) and (5) of writing.

Out of 24 students in category (3) for speaking, four moved to the top category say category (1); five moved to category (1); they improved their performance. Out of the remaining 15 students, four retained their rank in category (3), others slipped to lower categories. Seven came down to category (4); and four joined the bottom rank category (category 5) of writing.

Out of 20 students in category (4) for speaking, seven students moved to the top category (1); nine moved to category (2); two moved to category (3) two students retained their position in category (4). None moved down to the bottom category (5) of writing.

Out of 8 students in category (5) for speaking, seven students moved to the top category (1); nine moved to category (2); two moved to category (3); and two students retained their position in category (4). None moved down to the bottom category (5) of writing.

The above positions relate to the number. They do not specifically state whether one student who was in the first category (marks secured in oral/speaking being 70 or more percentage) remained in the same category or moved down to a lower category. This position is as under:

Out of 80 students in the sample, only 2 retained their position in category (1) in both speaking and writing. Others moved up or down. Similarly, only three students retained their bottom category position in both speaking and writing; others joined them from the upper categories to make their number as 8 (in both writing and speaking).

Out of 80 students in all in the sample, only 4 students retained their position in category (2); only one moved to the first category; others joined lower ranks.

Out of 80 students in the sample, only 5 students retained their position in category (3); others joined lower ranks; only one moved to category (2).

Out of 80 students in the sample, 4 in category (4) retained their category; others moved up – three to category (1) and two to category (2); the remaining to category (3).

Out of 80 students, three retained their category (5); others moved up; one to the category (3), one to category (2).

Conclusions

Although English is being taught in the Arab region for a few decades or so now, the results are nowhere near the expected outcomes: Young adults are ill equipped to use the language as fluently or efficiently as can be desired. This is especially worrisome when one sees that many, if not all, factors present are conducive to effective learning of English as a foreign language: supportive administration, well trained teachers, effective curriculum, suitable books. What is however lacking is the approach of the language teachers. Further, unless learning of a language is essential little can be achieved: In most institutions and at most levels in the region the medium of instruction is the mother tongue. Ironically where English is being used as the medium the pedagogy is translation into the mother tongue! Pedagogues and language teachers have suggested a wide range of theories relevant to foreign language learning, but the general tilt is towards the situational approach.

It is an approach that places the liberty to decide upon the methodology into the hands of the language teacher who may decide in the classroom itself which approach to adopt. A method that worked with one set of students may fail to yield any result at all with another set: the classroom being a dynamic setting the teacher alone can decide upon the pedagogy.

Speaking and writing skills are as important as listening and reading. English language learners are ought to develop those four skills equally. There should be more focus on the productive skills (speaking and writing) if not equal to the receptive skills (listening and reading). This study highlighted very problematic issue of learning and acquiring a foreign/second language and made the following observations:

1. Only 10% of the students gained the top position in both speaking and writing.
2. There was an improvement in 80% of the students in writing; they were weak in speaking as compared to writing.
3. About 65% students, good at speaking were weak in writing and moved to lower categories in the evaluation of their writing test.
4. A majority of the students (about 90%) interviewed were educated in rural government schools, others either in private schools or in model schools run by the government. Adults in rural areas are either illiterate or busy in agricultural operations and cannot devote time to guide or supervise their wards about studies.
5. Properly trained teachers are not available to teach English in real or real-like situation. All the teachers in the present teach English through mother tongue/first language.
6. ITC has not been adopted for teaching of English: Conventional methods are used which do not match with the changed times and the students encounter difficulty in picking up English language.
7. Teaching of English starts in government schools from the fifth class onwards and that is too late to enable the child to develop the ability or desire to learn English as a foreign language.
8. In English medium schools and modern schools run by the government, there is more stress on rote learning rather than communicative use of the language, this is borne by the fact that the subjects performed better at writing than at speaking.

The authors have come to the following conclusions, based on the research questions enumerated earlier:

1. A child has a natural instinct to acquire language for communicating with others in the family and later with the peer group.
2. A child is also able to learn English in his/her childhood provided the language is present in the environment.
3. In government schools where English is taught from class four onwards the child considers it an avoidable burden. Since language has a deep relation with religion and socio-cultural ethos; foreign language is, therefore, considered as something out of their environment and, hence, unnecessary.
4. Teachers do not sufficiently emphasise upon their students/wards to learn English language with due exertion and interest as they also lack motivation for the same.
5. There is fear of wrong usage and being branded as irreligious and radical.

Teachers face multi-pronged challenges owing to their qualification, training as EFL teachers, use of the bilingual approach in language teaching, perception of the local culture, understanding of the psychology of the learners, their perception of the status of English, methods, strategies and pedagogy, ATRs (achievement test reports). The learners face challenges due to teaching styles of the teachers, adults' expectations of them, evaluation system, lack of proper motivation and attitude. A meeting point can be achieved only with an honest and timely assessment of the situation: One of the aims of this article also. In the light of these and our empirical data we can conclude that well trained teachers, together with the right level of motivation among parents as well as educational institutions, with the impetus of ITC can go a long way in training the young people in the use of English as well, if not better, as the mother tongue.

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