

FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH PERFORMANCE OF CLASS IV STUDENTS IN KAZHI AND KHOTOKHA PRIMARY SCHOOL, WANGDUE PHODRANG DZONGKHAG.

Abstract

Following a qualitative approach, this study reports on the factors affecting the performance of class IV students in English at Kazhi and Khotokha Primary School under Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag. The study involved sixteen participants: four teachers and six students from the two schools and their parents (n=6). Participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and the analysis showed that participants in general agreed that students faced difficulty in terms of their performance in English subject in class four. Findings showed that various factors affected students' performance in English. Participants reported factors such as students not being able to find adequate time for learning and practicing English, inadequate resources, parents' knowledge and skills in English and the level of curriculum as contributing factors. The implications of findings for the importance of providing adequate resources and future study examining class four English curriculum has been discussed.

Keywords: qualitative study, class four students, teachers, parents, English curriculum, resources

Introduction

English being a global language, it is not only offered as an important subject on its own in our curriculum, but it is also the medium of instruction for all other subject beside Dzongkha. Smith (1976) states that "English is an international Auxiliary Language" (p.36). Therefore, without a good English background a child is likely to struggle in subjects such as Science, Math, and Social Studies. A good level of written and spoken English is a foundation for good performance in other subjects for the Bhutanese students. Wilson & Trainin, 2007 (as cited in Westwood, 2008) states that the cornerstone of academic achievement and the foundation for success across the curriculum is learning to read and write proficiently.

I have been observing class IV English lessons at Kazhi Primary school for the last five years and found it to be one of the challenging subjects to teach and learn. Every year class IV academic performance is low compared to other primary grades. Most of the class IV students are not performing well both in formative and summative assessment especially in English subject. The evidence was discovered from midterm and annual exam consolidated result sheet academic year, 2021.

Those issues and challenges have encouraged me to carry out this research project. Moreover, it would be a great opportunity for me to find out why most of the students of class IV are unable to perform well in English subject and the factors affecting their performance.

Study context and problem statement

This study is carried out in Kazhi Primary school and Khotokha Primary school, Wangdue and the participants are class IV students from both the schools. All students have exposure to the English language as one of the medium of instructions for the past four years. Although, most of them face difficulty in learning English literature when they reach class IV, they can at least read and write simple English words and sentences. They also have basic understanding of spoken English.

The principal investigator started his teaching career in 2005 at Radi Lower secondary School in Trashigang Dzongkhag and have seventeen years serving of experience as a teacher and principal.

As an experienced teacher and a school leader, he has attended research trainings, and other workshops related to research and leadership and completed Masters M.Ed (Leadership & Management) course from Paro college of Education, Royal University of Bhutan in 2017. Similarly, the co-investigator is also an experienced teacher and a school principal with experience of attending research training and also completed M.Ed Masters M.Ed (Leadership & Management) course.

Through, my experience (Principal investigator), I came to notice that most of the teachers and students face difficulty in teaching and learning English in grade four. Students face difficulty to read and understand the text. Most of them are unable to read and write even a simple sentence.

They seek support from teachers and senior students to complete their task which was assigned to them. Gunning (2003, p.4) states that,

Reading is the first and foremost, magical, as those who recall learning to read or have witnessed their students discover the process will attest. It opens the door to a vast world of information, fulfillment, and enjoyment. After having learned to read, the person never quite the same”.

Similarly, Gibson (2008) asserts that the students’ difficulties in writing can be overcome through process of writing and guided writing to produce a good written work.

However, I argue that, although, teacher mentors and assesses students’ works by giving feedbacks on daily bases, a lot of grammatical errors occur in their written works. This is one of the main factors which contribute towards making students perform poorly in English examination.

Bhutanese students learn reading and writing skills starting class III; yet students face difficulty studying English literature when they reach class IV. Although, teachers ask students to read English text, they show less interest and even if they did, they struggle despite teacher’s effort in creating avenues through morning speeches, modeling reading, peer reading, and news reading. Lesesne(2006) pointed out that for pupils to be encouraged to read they should be allowed to choose the books they would like to read, to read books with lots of pictures in them, to read for contests, to have a classroom library and to have an author read to them at school(p.37).

After observing the issues and challenges faced by the teacher and students of class IV, I decided to carry out this research with the question “What are the factors affecting the performance of class IV students in English?”. I believe that this issue should be well examined through different angles to enhance the students’ learning.

Literature Review

Although, Ministry of Education has introduced new normal curriculum across the schools in Bhutan since the beginning of academic year 2021, students still face difficulties in learning English when they reach class IV. Class IV students can communicate and participate well in

English literary competitions. However, they still face difficulties in learning English curriculum. As a result, most of the students performed poorly in the class as well as in the examination.

I believe that it could be because of the factors such as poor reading habits, negative behaviors, actions, and beliefs of the teachers and lack of family support at home. Christenson (2002) stated that home plays an important role in children's learning and achievement because children learn many values, attitudes, skills, and behaviors at home prepares them for school tasks.

Moreover, teachers are considered second parents of the students and main facilitators of their knowledge. Therefore, teacher must keep good relationship to know the strengths and weaknesses of students to impart knowledge. Eiss (1969) supports that having good relation between teachers and students not only enhances academic performance, but it also helps cognitive development. Students having closer relation with teachers usually perform well in academics. They can freely communicate with their teacher, and they often look at their teachers as a role model and a trusted person.

Burden, (2000) postulates that motivation is another important factor in encouraging student's participation in the classroom activities which is a very important avenue for improving students spoken language. If a teacher can motivate students, they are more likely to participate in the class activities and less likely to get off task and contribute to disruptive behavior. Further, according to Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002), the teacher has to get to know the strengths and shortcomings of each student so the strengths can be developed further, and shortcoming can be addressed.

Improving student's academic performance is one of the key responsibilities of teachers. Parental involvement in child's learning is also important. According to Lumpkin (2010), parental involvement not only improves a child's morale attitudes and academic achievement across all subject areas, but it also promotes better behavior and social adjustment. Korkmaz (2007, p2) supports the above statements that:

Parents should love, respect, and care about their children, take responsibility in their children's education, take care of their children's basic needs and school needs, have a good communication with the teachers and other staff in school, not put pressure on their children, provide a good atmosphere for their children to study at home, be aware about what their children do, be a role model for their children, get to know their

children's capacity and motivate them based on their interests, and let their children play games and participate in social activities.

Similarly, Sanders and Epstein (2005) states that the success of schools is heavily influenced by connections between school, family and community. They noted that students who receive support from home, family and community are triply benefitted, and are more likely to be academically successful than those who do not. (p.215)

Students should be aware of what,how and why they are learning. They depend heavily on teachers,parents, and friends. Moreover,most of them do not build reading habits andhardly reads books at home and in school.According toPang et al. (2003), readers make progress by reading more. By reading more, they increase their vocabulary and knowledge. This in turn helps them to make further gains in reading and learning. Once children can recognize written words in their language with relative ease, they need to develop fluency in reading. Fluency develops with both oral language development and print exposure. The more children read, the more vocabulary and knowledge they acquire, and the more fluent they become in reading.

Gambrell (1996) found that when children were asked which book they had enjoyed most, 80% of them said that the ones they had enjoyed most were the ones they had chosen themselves. Greaney (1996) also says that having access to and use of a wide range of self-selected materials is associated with acquisition of vocabulary and comprehension skills in addition to development of reading habits.

Indeed Gibson (2004) pointed out that for pupils to be encouraged to read they should be allowed to choose the books they would like to read, to read books with lots of pictures in them, to read for contests, to have a classroom library and to have an author read to them at school (As cited in Lesesne (2006) p.37).Furthermore, Farrant (1997, as cited in Nalusiba 2006) emphasized that the best way of promoting reading is the use of informal methods of reading rather than formal methods. He further noted that informal methods stimulate a desire in the child to read before trying to teach him to read. He noted that this was done through storytelling and reading by the teacher and by consulting books to find out things so that children could associate books with pleasure and usefulness (p.15).

It is evident from the literature that we reviewed that improving students' academic performance and English language proficiency in particular is a collective responsibility between the teachers and parents and that factors affecting their performance should be considered in both the school and home context. Therefore, in this study, we have proposed the following research question to examine the factors affecting the performance of class IV students in English.

What are the factors affecting the performance of class IV students in English?

The questions considers factors in both school and home and therefore the focus of the study is on the school students, teachers and parents.

Method of data collection

According to Creswell (2009) strategies of inquiry are the type of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs that provide specific direction for procedure in a research design (p.2). Among the three strategies, we have used qualitative design' in our study considering that our main research aim is to explore the factors affecting student performance. Sherab (2009, p.1) states that "qualitative research is the development of the first-hand knowledge derived from the natural setting through direct and intensive contact with the research participants".

For this study the data was gathered through interview. The participants are drawn from the two primary schools under Wangduephodrang Dzongkhag (Kazhi Primary School and Khotokha Primary School). The participants were teachers and students at the above-mentioned schools, and they are currently teaching and learning in class IV. Two teacher participants were selected from those teachers who are currently not teaching English in class but, have experience in teaching class III and IV in 2019 and 2020. The parent participants were also the parents of current class IV students. In total this study, involved thirteen participants, four teachers (three male and one female), six students (three male and three female) and six parents (one male and five female).

All the participants were interviewed by using semi structured interviews. Interview questions were included as appendix. Patton (1990) describes that there are no rules for sample size in

qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done with available time and resources” (p.94).

Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they were allowed to withdraw from the study anytime they want. They were also made aware about how the information collected from them would be only used for the purpose of the study and that their confidentiality would be maintained.

It is easier to conduct the interviews with participants in a comfortable environment where the participants do not feel restricted or uncomfortable to share the information. Burns (1998) suggest “what people actually do and say be compared with their account of what they did and spoke. The two methods of collecting data must be employed in such inquiries-observation and interviewing” (p.34). To authenticate the reliability and validity of this study the researcher has collected the data and done triangulation, transcription, and data interpretation.

Data analysis

The analysis and interpretation of the data were collected from teachers, students and parents from two different primary schools of Wangdue Dzongkhag. Both the schools are located in remote places. The school (A) was day school and it was established in 2001. The location of school was in rural area with 8.960 acres of land. It is 21 km away from the Wangdue Dzong. This school has eight teachers and 138 students (Girls 77 and Boys 61).

The school (B) is also day school established in 1992. It was also located in rural area with 15.57 acres of land and 50 km away from the Wangdue Dzong. This school has eight teachers and 135 students (Girls 73 and Boys 62). We had chosen those schools with an aim to interview the participants to collect data for the research. Burns (1998) suggest “what people actually do and say be compared with their account of what they did and said....two methods of collecting data must be employed in such inquiries-observation and interviewing” (p.34).

The study involved sixteen participants: four teachers and six students from the two different schools and their parents (n=6). Participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The selection of participants were done as per their interest.

Coding:

The codes used for the selected schools and participants are stated hereunder: School (A) Kazhi Primary School and the School (B) for Khotokha Primary School. Teacher one, Parent one and Student one for teacher, parent and student participants from school A. Teacher two, Parent two and Student two for teacher, parent and student participants from school B.

The data was analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) framework for thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly, and codes were generated and organized into themes and sub-themes. Themes were identified according to the criteria suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) as information related to the broad research interest, prevalence across some of the participant responses and richness in the narratives. For example, theme difficulty scoring in English was identified because it relates to the research question and there is a pattern evident in the responses. Responses related to student difficulty in English are discussed under this theme.

Theme 1 : Difficulty scoring in English

Many students that we interviewed agreed that they faced difficulty learning class IV English. We asked their opinion and they shared that they found it difficult to score good marks in English. For instance, student participant two from School (A) stated "In mid-term exam I could not score good marks in English..." However, student participant three from school (A) claims that, "in midterm exam I have scored only sixty three and it was not a good marks". Students from sample school (B) shared similar views. Student participant one from school (B) shared "during my mid-term examination my performance is average".

We asked similar question to the teachers and parents, and they had similar view that students in general struggled with English subject. Parent participant two from sample school (A) shared the following opinion. "She [referring to her daughter] did not perform well". The views shared by parents from sample school (B) were very similar to what the parents from sample school (A) shared. Parent participant one from sample school (B) stated that, "my son could not perform well in the mid-term exam. Likewise, parent participant three from school (B) shared that, "my daughter didn't perform well in exam".

Teacher from both the school shared that students struggled with English. Following are some of the quotes shared by the teacher participants:

Teacher participant one from school (A) stated that “From my point of view, In general the standard of English is extremely low, particularly in class IV. However, teacher participant two from sample school (A) shared that “whatever we do the way we communicate should be in English. So, I feel that English is must and children should perform well in English. Moreover, teacher one from sample school (B) stated that “Four class four students based on strands – Listening, reading and writing is average. Speaking is below average. In addition teacher participant two from sample school (B) declared that “As compared to urban students our rural students has low performance particularly English subject”.

Theme 2: Factors contributing to difficulty in English

The students attributed their difficulty in English to not being able to put enough effort and not being able to concentrate in the class. They stated “failed to study hard “and not concentrating in the class”. The students also mentioned that they do not understand English. They failed to understand the questions and face difficulty in writing with correct spelling.

Students also shared factors such as difficulty in pronouncing English terms as evidenced by their statements: “unable to pronounce the words effectively and difficult to overcome spelling errors while we are assigned with writing works.”

Student participant two and three from school (B) mentioned, “I don’t understand English as I don’t have a good base, our parents are illiterate and they are not able to help us, our elder siblings are also in some other school, so it’s quite difficult to understand. Sometimes I go to my friends to learn.” In addition to that statement, some parents have the same view. The parent participant two and three from school (A) stated that their children studies less and plays more. They attributed factors such as their children not finding time to study at home as contributing to their struggle in English.

Parent participant one from school(A) stated “since she is uneducated she is not able to provide academic support.” However, parent two from school (B) argued “her child is good in studies, and she feels that her daughter’s performance has been affected due to the ongoing pandemic. She said that her daughter was not able to attend regular classes due to the pandemic in 2020 which has affected her performance. When the teachers send assignments in the social media platforms such as we chat, she used to seek help from the elders, and she used to copy what the

elders have written. As a mother, I was not able to provide support as I am uneducated”. Moreover, parent participant from school(A) added “Other factors such as children having to do household chores as taking time away from their study”. Similarly, parent three from school (B) shared “though they do not make them do the house hold chores, yet when they (parents) are out working in the farms, their children have no option but to do house hold chores.”

Most of the teacher participant on the other hand stated that the main cause of low performance of class IV students would be due to sudden switch in different areas of learning package from lower primary to upper primary. However, teacher two from school(A) and teacher one from school(B) agreed with the parents that students find learning English challenging because they are not able to get adequate support at home in terms of academic support because most parents are illiterate which means that they cannot read, write, and speak English. Similarly, the teacher respondent two from School (A) states that “the students face difficulty in learning language, because of illiterate parents, lacking skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. The teacher participant one from school (B) states that “poor performance could be due to poor reading habits which leads to poor understanding”. Other factors shared by the teachers include students learning skills, poor reading habit, peer influence, parental background, and learning infrastructure and environment.

Another interesting factor shared by a teacher two from school(B) stated “ using of local language to explain concepts in English as hampering students English skills”. However, the teacher two from school (B) stated, “using Dzongkha as a medium helps them to understand the concept but they face problem in putting them in words later.”

However, the teachers felt that to improve student’s English skills, teachers need to have the understanding that students are all diverse in their learning ability. Teacher two from school (A) and (B) stated, “Children are of different ability, and understanding them is important. So, when dealing with them we need to cater to the need of different individual and then the other one could be their behaviour issues.” Therefore, motivating and encouraging the students is important.

Theme 3: Support services available.

Parental Support

The students are of the view that they do not have to do any household chores, they are advised to study and not to play with mobile phone. The student respondent one from school (B) stated, “They [parents] do not let me do any home chores, they make me complete my homework and advise me to study only. The parent respondent one and two from school (A) and parent two from school (B) stated that “they used to inquire about homework, and make sure the children complete the assigned work. They also advise the children to seek help from the elder siblings or class VI students. Parents being uneducated they are not able to monitor homework effectively”. However, some of the parent respondent said that they do support their child to complete the work.

Teacher Support

While inquiring about the academic support the teachers provide, Teacher two from school (A) stated that “she encourages the students to read books and help them to clear their doubts during free time. Teacher one from the same school shared that “she (teacher) “encourage active learning and provide model reading. Boost participation and reinforce the skills and values.”

Simillary, Teacher one from school (B) stated that “he gives more opportunities to speak and discuss in class using English as medium, and also focus more on reading”. In addition to the above statement the teacher participant two from the same school (B) stated that “he provides resources, use different strategies and practice reading.”

In the same way, students shared similar views on the help provided by their English teacher. They states that they are provided support through social media (we chat), coaching classes after the school, re-teaching the lesson, making them read text and library books, and explaining them till they understand the concept, etc. Student participant three from school (A) explained, “Our English teacher always encourages us to visit at her home to learn English subject better. So, I used to visit madam’s house and learn what is unknown to me.”

Teacher two from school (A) also stated that “ she use teaching materials/teaching aids such as flash cards, presentation and audio visual aids such as videos, power point presentations, ICTs, work sheets and print materials, to support students learning”.

Theme 4: Services needed/required

When we enquired about the services that the school and teachers needed, all the teacher participant from school (A) and (B) shared that they needed more resources in terms of teaching learning materials, allocated separate reading periods, more ICT facilities so that students can enjoy learning English, and better internet connectivity in the schools.

Theme 5: Issues with class IV English curriculum

In class IV, the English curriculum includes teaching and writing of essays, poems, letters, and stories. Teacher-participant one from school (A) shared that “the English curriculum is very challenging for the students of class IV due to the vastness of the text and improper (insufficient) time distribution. The level of the content does not match with the level of students”. Further, this respondent shared that may be from class III when they directly go to class IV there is a big jump in the curriculum. In class III, there is less of writing and most of the time students use pencil to write in the workbook. But in class IV students must write more with the pen including higher level essays. So, the sudden change in the level is a challenge for students. Even in teaching, the lesson input is more compared to what they have done in class III. In addition, teachers two from school(B) stated that “teacher do not have freedom to craft the activities in different ways. The teachers are required to follow the prescribed curriculum whereby teachers should teach as per the manual”.

Most of the teacher-participant from both the sample schools supported the above statement and said that the factor which effects the performance of class IV students in English is because of the higher standard of English content.

Discussion and recommendations.

The current qualitative study investigated factors contributing to class IV students facing difficulty in English subject at Kazhi and Khotokha schools under Wangdue Dzongkhag. Findings from the analysis of the semi structured interviews involving teachers, parents and students showed that grade IV students in both the schools faced difficulty scoring good grades in English various factors contributed to students’ difficulty in English subjects. Factors include

students not being able to put in enough effort, parents not being English literate and therefore not being able to provide adequate support and guidance, sudden change in the level of curriculum in class IV, schools not having adequate support in terms of ICT facilities and the use of local language to teach concepts in English by the teachers.

According to Menheree and Hooge (n.d), parental involvement in children's education matters. It matters for their achievement, motivation and well-being at school". The findings from the current study showed that most of the parents are very supportive. However, findings showed that most parents being illiterate in English, they were not able to provide adequate support and guidance at home. In alignment the finding from our study, Fema, (2003) was of the view that the major cause of the errors in English can be attributed to the interference of mother tongue with the English language. He added that students often use their native language or mother tongue in all their interactions and English is only used within the four walls of the classrooms and ends there. Our findings also show that teachers use of local language to teach concepts to students as hampering students English language development.

Our findings also showed that teachers felt that inadequate resources in the school in terms of ICT facilities, reliable internet connection, availability of teaching and learning materials, and proper time allotted for teaching and supporting English as hampering students English performance. These challenges pertaining to resources facing schools in Bhutan has been reported in a study by Kamenopoulou and Dukpa (2017) Bhutanese teachers' perspectives on inclusion and disability. We argue that although the government may not be able to provide all the resources immediately, considering that English is a core subject and a medium of instruction in our schools, government prioritize these issues and make appropriate plans to address the issues gradually.

Another pertinent factor that came out of our study is the complexity and high level of English curriculum in class four and the sudden change of level for students between class three and four. Teacher participants expressed that class four curriculums is very challenging for the students because there is a sudden jump in the level between class three and class four English curriculum in terms of complexity and also vastness. For instance, in class four students are expected to write more complex level of essays requiring them to use their understanding of more complex and abstract concepts. Following these findings from our study, we argue that there should be some room for change or adjustment in how students are prepared in class three or perhaps

provide more time to students to learn English in class four and give teachers flexibility to adjust how the curriculum is delivered. In addition, we propose that government to prioritise support to schools in terms of providing resources that will encourage students to take interest in English, give avenue for teachers discuss best practices and initiate studies to examine and review English curriculum.

Limitations of the study

We acknowledge that a larger number of participants could have resulted in much deeper or richer narratives in terms of findings. The language competency of the participants could have also impacted the type of responses generated.

Conclusion

Through the use of qualitative method, the current study investigated factors affecting class IV students' English performance in Kazhi and Khotokha primary school under Wangdue Dzongkhag. The analysis of qualitative interviews gathered from class fours students, their teachers and parents showed that class four students in general struggled with English curriculum. The analysis of the data showed that a multitude of factors such as students not being able to put adequate effort, illiterate parents, inadequate resources, and complex curriculum contributed to difficulty faced by students in English. We recommend that government prioritize providing adequate resources and initiate study examining relevancy, regency, and adequacy of the current class four English curriculum.

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APPENDIX I

Semi structure interview questionnaire for the Teachers

Interview questionnaire:

1. I am carrying out a research to know the factors that affect learning of English for class four students. As a teacher what is your opinion towards child's English performance?

2. What kind of academic support do you give to class IV students?
3. What kind of academic support do you expect from the school administration?
4. What do you think affects the performance of class IV students in English?
5. What strategies do you use to teach English in class IV?
6. How do you assess students' work?
7. What are the challenges you face while teaching English in class IV?
8. What difficulties do you face while dealing with students?
9. How many English periods do you take in a week?
10. Can you tell some differences in teaching of English in class III and IV?
11. What kind of strategies do you use to improve students reading skill?
12. What type of Teaching Learning Materials do you use while teaching? English in class IV?
13. What type of responsibilities do you take besides your classroom teaching?
14. What is your opinion about the existing class IV English curriculum?

APPENDIX II

Semi structure interview questionnaire for class IV students

Interview questionnaire:

1. I am conducting a research to understand the factors that affect learning of class IV English.

As a student what do you say about your English performance?

2. What kind of academic support do you get from your English teacher?

3. What kind of academic support do you get from your Parents? If not why?

4. Can you tell some of the factors affecting your English performance?

5. How does your teacher teach English in the class?

6. How does your English teacher assess your work?

7. What are the challenges that you face while learning English in class IV?

8. What strategies do you use to improve your reading skill?

9. How can you improve your writing skill?

10. What do you do after the school hours?

11. How do your friends help you in learning?

12. What kind of academic help do you wish to get from your teachers?

APPENDIX VI

Semi structure Interview questionnaire for the Parents

Interview questionnaire:

1. I am conducting a research to understand the factors that affect learning of English for class four students. Could you please tell some of the factors that affect the performance of your child?
2. Could you please tell some of the factors that affect the performance of your child?
3. How often do you communicate with your child's English teacher? Why?
4. How do you check the home works of your child at home? If not why?
5. What are the challenges that you face while supporting your child's learning?
6. Do you think the involvement of parents will make difference in students' learning?
7. How do you engage your child at home after the class?
8. What difficulties does your child face in terms of academics?
9. How is the location of school related to the students' academic performance?
10. As a parent how do you manage time to help your child's learning?
11. What is your general opinion towards teaching English in class IV?