

School-Based Teachers' Professional Development Policies: Learning from the Practices of English Classroom at Public Secondary School in Northern Pakistan

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Overview

- Professional development is critically important for teachers
- Teachers in Pakistan are not professionally trained
- There is no language policy on English teaching and learning in Pakistan
- Pakistani classrooms lack action research to improve classroom practices
- There is a need to challenge the myth that “teaching in public sector is final and unchangeable destination” which is a big hindrance on teachers’ learning

Professional development (PD) is critically important for the professional survival of classroom-level teachers across the globe and Pakistan is no exception. Mentoring and action research are one of the various forms of PD. Conducting PD sessions help teachers improve pedagogy, classroom practices and to become self-directed learners (Slepko 2008; McNif, 2016). This study reports learning from a PD session and classroom action research from English class in a mountainous northern part of Pakistan. Teachers were exposed to various techniques of general teaching, lesson planning, writing reflections/ portfolios and classroom management through a 5-day workshop. After the sessions, the teachers taught English to grade 7 students for three cycles. Pre- and post- intervention tests, teachers’ reflective diaries, lesson plans and portfolio books were sources of data collection. The study shows that there is a thirst amongst teachers for professional grooming. Also, students gradually benefitted from new teaching techniques. The study suggests mentoring and action research to be integral part of school professional development plan, so as to improve learning outcomes of students and teachers’ professional growth. Sustainability of these initiatives is a challenge due to lack of proper mechanism and policies. There is a need for a school policy on classroom level research to improve teaching practices and learning.

Key Policy Issues

- I. Pakistan government ought to invest on the professional development of teachers
- II. There is a need for clear language policy to teach English as second language and medium of instructions
- III. Classroom based action research should be made compulsory in schools' annual development plan

Policy Shift

Pakistan saw a policy shift in 1972 from a very general to a more technical and scientific education, at the secondary and higher secondary school levels. However, appropriate long-term planning was not undertaken (Halai, 2008).

English and National Curriculum

National curriculum gives ample importance to English for development in Pakistan. The document reads: "In the current scenario, English is the language of international communication, higher learning and better career options. It should, therefore, reach the masses so that there is no discrimination amongst the rich and poor in Pakistan in terms of opportunities for personal, professional and economic development" (National Curriculum 2006, p.1).

Pakistan's national curriculum 2006 and 2009 emphasizes on activity-based teaching and teaching beyond text to teach English. The curriculum specifically mentions the students' learning outcomes (SLOs), standards and bench marks for each class. To achieve these SLOs and standards the curriculum encourages use of reference books and other materials rather using the given text books.

English Text book in Public School

English text books (taught curriculum) in public schools-though of poor quality -also emphasis activity-based teaching. While majority of teachers, if not all, place their teaching predominantly on talk and chalk method, these teachers nonetheless have the ability to advance. What they lack currently are teaching skills, motivation and determination to make changes in their classrooms. The traditional method of teaching focuses on lecture method without hands on activities, making the students hardly fully understand the language pattern and differentiating teaching language than teaching a science or other subject which focus on understanding scientific concepts (Rehmani, 2006; Warsi, 2004).

Lack of proper policy for teaching English in the country

What happens is the government, after resumption of office, declares their policy of teaching English in order to achieve the democratic ideals of equal opportunity. The decision is politically motivated and subsequently embraces serious challenges during implementation. Moreover, point to ponder is that without qualified and trained teachers, how the government rhetoric of equal opportunity to learn English in a polarized education system would become possible. Therefore, the issue of teaching English remains live issue for every successive government (Warsi, 2004); (Shamim, 2008). In sum teachers and students have difficulties in teaching and learning English.

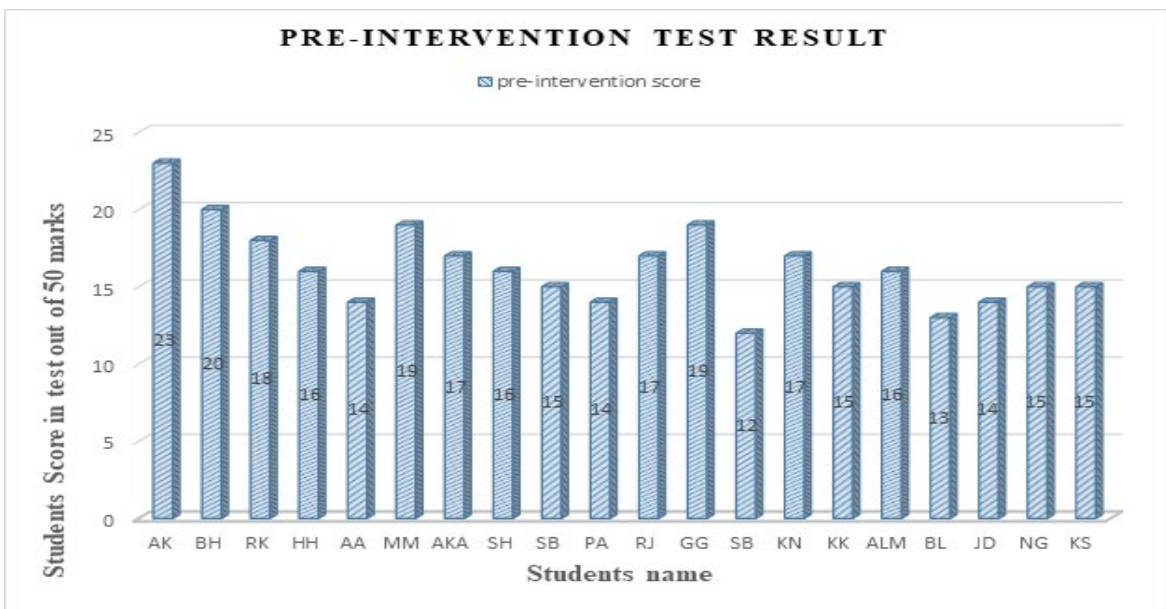
Research Questions

To address the above two major issues, this paper explored two questions;

- How can teachers be trained through mentoring and professional development sessions to teach better English? And
- How can students’ English learning be enhanced through hands on and minds of activities?

The first question was addressed by conducting a five-day workshop for the teachers. Key elements were teacher’s lesson plans, reflective writing, preparing portfolios and activity-based teaching through hands on and minds of activities, including Think-Pair-Share, Building Vocabulary Bank, Numbered -Head-Together, One-Minute Monologue and Trust Your Brain, and Word of the Day (Khan, 2018). Similarly, John Dewey’s original work of reflection was used where he defines reflection as active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends (Dewey, 1933).

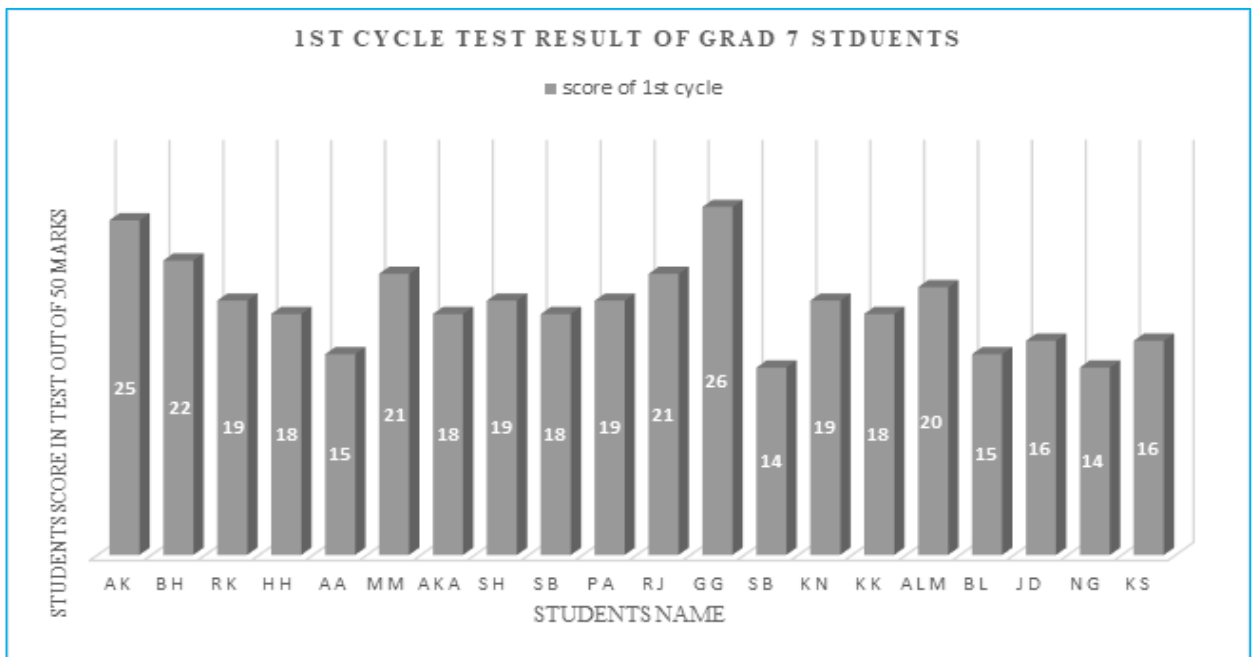
In addition, teachers were also referred to Schon (1983) who has further developed and revised John Dewey’s work with the title 'reflection in-action'. It is a reflective conversation with the materials of a situation, and each teacher carries out his own evolving role... 'listens' to the surprises ('back talk') that result from earlier moves, and responds through [emerging needs] (Schon 1987: 3 1). In this process, researcher played dual roles: resource person and as collaborator/critical friend in action research. These sessions meant to orient the teachers on developing lessons with Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound (SMART) objectives, having flavor of writing reflections, understating how to develop portfolio and teaching English with innovative activities and discouraging talk and chalk method (Khan & Afaqi, 2019). Having the flavor of new ideas, now teachers were eager to implement the new learned techniques in the class and thus planned for the first cycle of classroom intervention. To determine students’ existing learning, a test was administered with the following results:



For the first week three lessons were planned, (reading comprehension, story and essay writing and part of speech). The teacher started teaching as planned and the facilitator observed his class. The techniques he used were loud reading, silent reading, skimming and scanning. He did not allow students to speak local language and would punish those who did so. He wrote five questions on the board and said “skim through your book at page# [3] and answer the questions”. He further said that nobody was allowed to discuss to each other as it was silent reading. After five minutes no student was able to answer any question. All the students were confused. Then the teacher proceeded to the next activity by reading a paragraph twice and asked the students to follow. This time only one student did it. He wrote five words on the board with pronunciation and asked the students to repeat. The teacher then wrote their meanings and asked the students to take note. He ended the lesson with an assignment:

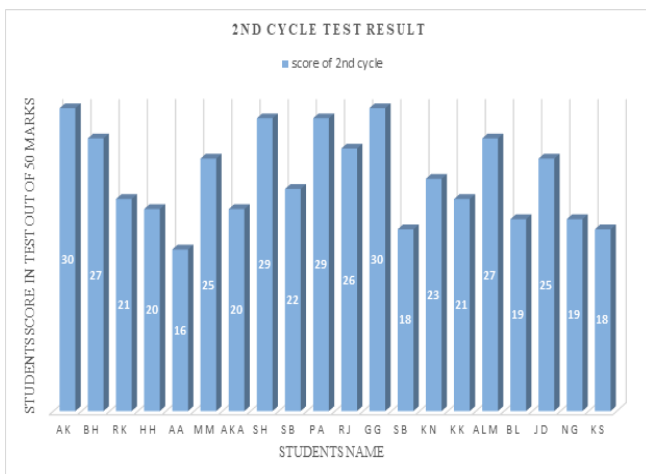
“use the five words which we have learnt today to create a sentence of your own”. After the class the teacher met me for five minutes to discuss and reflect on the session. Upon completion of the first round of teaching, we took a short test to examine students’ learning outcomes. The following graph shows the results with slightly improved learning.

The graph shows an overall gradual improvement in students’ learning. It also elucidates that majority of the students is learning at the same pace. Most of the students solved the first part of questions which required them to answer based on a paragraph. But none of the students except two attempted the writing part. We guessed that students knew the meaning of the words but misspelled them. Students could not make a complete sentence. This gave us an idea to plan for the cycle two.



Cycle-2

Based on the reflections and observation, some techniques like drill, loud reading and group work were continued. In cycle-2 writing was introduced, as we believe that language skills were interlined and one could support other to develop (Shamin, 2008). After the reading activity, the teacher assigned a task to the students to write a short paragraph of around ten sentences on 'my village'. The students performed this task in group. Afterwards the students were asked to check the work of other groups and give them feedback with "stars", up to five, if the writing was good and a "wish" if the work had spelling/punctuation mistakes etc. This activity was a totally new idea for the students and each group gave only stars to each other even without reading the passage. Moreover, while teaching grammar the next day, we introduced Think-Pair-Share, 'Word of the Day', 'Trust Your Brain' and 'Vocabulary Bank' (Tomlinson, 2013). Our purpose in the week was first to reinforce the previous learning. Therefore, back and forth method was used to remind them of the previous activity and associate it with the current one. We decided to continue this procedure in the third week. It is noteworthy that students' learning was also assessed on the spot. Following charts show the learning outcomes of the students in cycle-2.



Cycle-3

Like the previous weeks we reflected on the techniques and their effects on students' learning. We introduced three new techniques this week. In the last cycle we taught four lessons using the hands on and minds of activities. This time we could feel that students were almost familiar with what we were doing in the class and they would wait for the time restlessly to work in group and give feedback to each other. To make the class more interesting and captivating, we adopted another activity: think-Pair-share technique in the class. Students took keen interest. The activity was as follow:

Activity: tell us five characteristics of your favorite teacher.

Stage-1: Thinking

The students were asked to critically think on the assigned task for two minutes.

Stage-2: Pairing

After two minutes, students were asked to form group with students of their choice and discuss their thoughts for five minutes.

Stage-3: Sharing

They shared their idea with the whole class.

Next day another technique 'Numbered Head Together' was used. This technique meant to assess students' understanding of a lesson topic.

Step-1: Numbering

Students were divided in to 3-4-member teams and assigned with a number.

Step-2: Questioning

Students were asked a general question (how can you improve your English-speaking skill?)

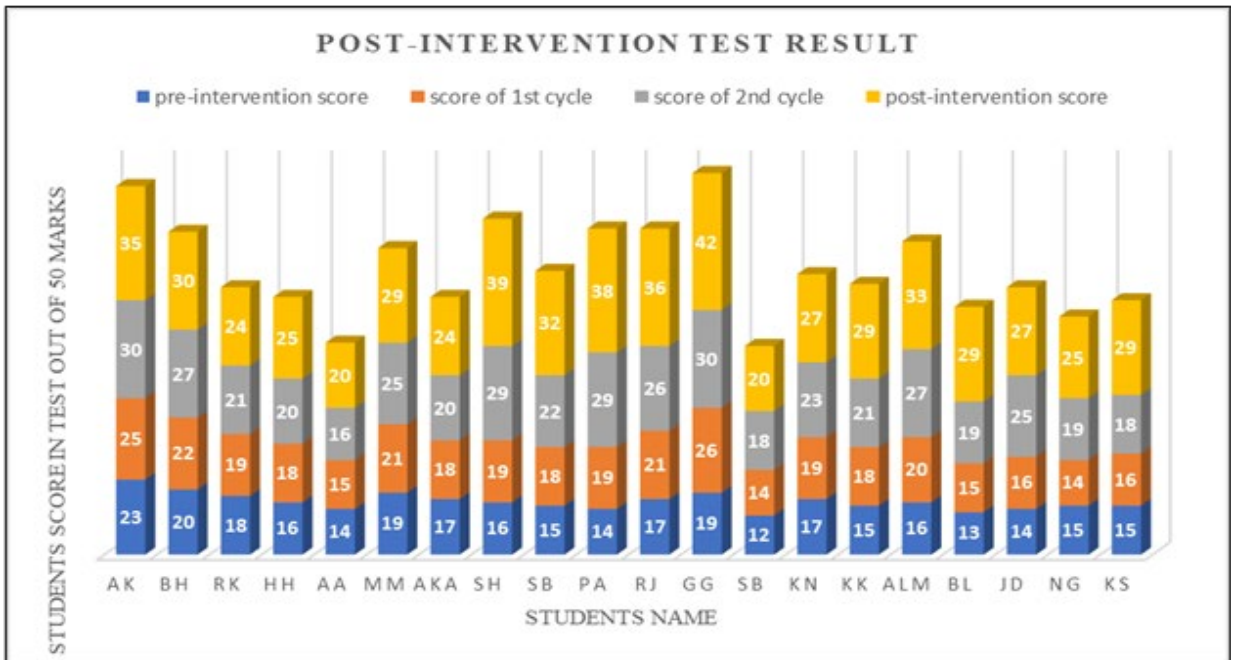
Step-3: Head Together

The students were instructed to put their head together and discuss the answer so that every student knew the answer well.

Step-4: Answering

A random number was called and students having the number from each group came in front of the class and answered the question. It was a very good activity, and we also learnt that clear instruction is very important for students to understand the question and act accordingly. Upon completion of the three lessons we again administered the same test to see if there was any improvement in students' learning. Graph below shows post-intervention test result;

The post intervention result reveals that students have satisfactorily improved than before. In the first intervention, the average learning score of the students was 19%, while in the second intervention, it went up to 24.4% and in the last intervention, it was 30%. With the gradual progress we kept changing the techniques and found that students were keen in the activities and tried to speak English with the teacher and even with their classmates in the class. When asked about the activities, the students said that they were happy to learn new things. One student said, "it was a very interesting activity and provided me the time to think. Teacher should use such technique daily" (tr dairy,2019).

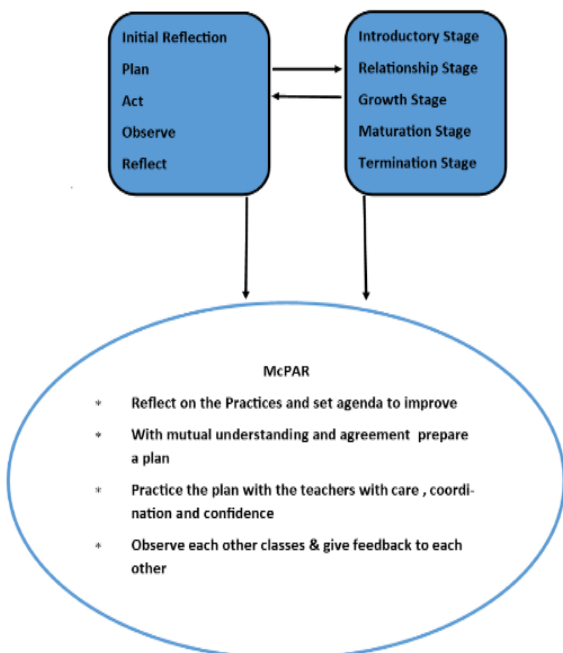


Emergence of New model

The intervention started from the training and ended up with an action research intervention in the class, offering a new model for teachers’ professional development as well as improving classroom practices. The model involves multiple approaches which are easy to comprehend, practical and real, and relevant to the context we work. Consequently, the amalgamation of mentoring and participatory action research synthesized our learning into the following model;

The model suggests that there are great similarities in the mentoring and action research model. Each start with rapport building followed by reflecting on the practices and then identifying area for improvement. After that planed is developed to implement and then reflect on the learning. Therefore, instead of taking ‘action research’ and mentoring separately it is wise to go ahead under one umbrella. Thus, this model trained the teachers first and then required them to teach students with new techniques to enhance their learning outcomes.

McPAR Model-2020



With all its limitations we recommend other teachers in the vicinity to practice it, learn from it and add on to it for further modification and learning.

Reflections, lessons learnt and conclusion

The school where this study was conducted depicts a vulnerable situation of chilly weather, scarcity of human and material resources, poor infrastructure and huge poverty. The area is a single crop zone and 99% of the people earn their breed through farming and herding. Despite all these challenges, education is a spark of hope for the local people in that remote area. These teachers have strong content knowledge, but need further training to sharpen it. Teachers face difficulties in teaching in English. Majority of the teachers speak broken English. However, they are eager to learn, particularly the English language. To quench their learning thirst, they used their spare time to participate in this project. But could they continue to be motivated and maintain this commitment? I leave this question to the discretion of the teachers for their reflections.

For professional development, acceptance and cooperation is important, but unfortunately, they are what these teachers lack.

This study doesn’t claim of students’ mastery over English. Instead, it was a little effort to arouse teachers’ motivation and help them change. At the same time, the teachers also should come forward and take initiatives to change/improve their practices.

Overall, these teachers have a key role in the development of the school as well as the village. No outsider would change the teachers except themselves. Such school-based policy decision will have great effect on students learning.

Creating culture of togetherness and collaboration not only help teachers but also help students enhance their learning outcomes. How we can sustain such initiatives and make them involved in the teaching is questionable. Unfortunately, most of such innovative activities lose their essence soon after the maturation stage. It is due to lack of policies and accountability in the system which makes teacher not responsible. Therefore, there is a dire need of an education policy which makes classroom action research necessary and associate it with compensation and remuneration.

Policy Implications

Based upon the intervention with teachers and students, this study found many policy gaps that hindrance smooth learning in the class not only for English but also for general teaching in the context of public sector in Gilgit-Baltistan. Below I highlight some policy level implications of this study.

Formulation of language policy

The government does not have a practical and feasible policy on English teaching and learning. Public schools have more issues than the private ones. Therefore, a clear language policy with guidelines to teach English as a second language in Pakistan particularly for Gilgit-Baltistan is required (Shamim, 2008).

Establishment of professional development center

Due to rapid technological changes, the demands of the society and teaching are changing and therefore, there is a need to establish an institution to train teachers regularly and ensure the sustainability of such trainings.

Teacher Certification

Untrained and poorly qualified teachers harm the quality of classroom teaching, especially when they are appointed on bribe, favoritism and ideological grounds. These also discourage talented people to enter into public sector. Initiation of teacher certification program will attract potential talent to work for schools while offering unqualified teachers an honor exit.

Effective appraisal policy for teacher

There exists hardly any policy making teachers accountable for students' learning. In public sector, school principals write an 'annual confidential report' (ACR) without considering students' learning. Therefore, effective appraisal policy is needed to engage teachers in research. Also, annual salary increments should be linked with performance appraisal.

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