

Sociocultural Theory in Practice: Addressing Issues Affecting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching-Learning in Hail Remote Schools

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Abstract—Sociocultural theory aims to explain how physical and cultural environments shape learning. The research uses Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory as the lens to investigate sociocultural issues faced by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in remote areas. Teaching in these areas presents difficulties and obstacles due to geographic distance. This qualitative study was designed to investigate the difficulties encountered by EFL instructors from schools in isolated villages of Hail, Saudi Arabia. Using semi-structured individual interviews with eight EFL teachers, the research uncovers various obstacles affecting the efficacy of EFL teaching. The primary issues identified are religious conservatism and cultural differences, lack of support from family and environment, geographic distance and resource constraints, and lack of awareness of future opportunities. The study highlights how differences in educational quality are made worse due to geographic remoteness. The project seeks to improve EFL instruction in remote places by offering a deeper knowledge of these issues, ultimately working towards equity in learning environments.

Index Terms—EFL, remote areas teaching, EFL teaching-learning issues, sociocultural theory, Saudi Arabia

I. INTRODUCTION

English facilitates global communication and commerce and it is considered a crucial global language (Ke, 2015; Pan & Block, 2011; Ricento, 2012). As a global language, it promotes monolingualism (Alshammari et al., 2021; Lin, 2013). English is extensively used in commerce, science, and technology, making it the predominant language worldwide (Pennycook, 2017). English offers numerous business opportunities and facilitates international trade. Using English as the universal language in business has led to increased global trade (Sing, 2017). English also plays a crucial role in politics, facilitating international communication and relations (Xhemaili, 2022).

Strengthening the basic components of society is a prerequisite for economic growth and development, with education and training being two of the most crucial means to achieve this (Bouzahzah et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2022). Moreover, through education, governments provide people with the skills and information needed to succeed in various industries. Education also aids in improving living conditions, cultivating civic engagement, and stimulating originality and creativity (Kim & Ahn, 2019). It facilitates a person’s capacity to grow personally and professionally and to achieve goals.

The setting of EFL learning has recognised language as a necessary skill for global communication (Shen & Chiu, 2019). The communicative approach has emerged as the main paradigm for language instruction in EFL teaching and learning and has achieved international prominence due to its strong emphasis on developing effective communication skills (Hattani, 2018). This study fills in the gaps by addressing the challenges associated with providing EFL instruction in remote villages. This study aims to identify the obstacles and challenges hindering the effectiveness of English language teaching in these areas. Understanding these challenges is crucial as they impact the quality of education and the opportunities available to students in remote villages.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the discovery of oil, English was introduced to Saudi Arabia in 1930 as a business language. It was added to the curriculum in Saudi schools in 1950 (Alrashidi, 2015). English is taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. Numerous studies have identified challenges in teaching English, including inadequate training and teacher incompetence (Alfahadi, 2014). In addition, there are insufficient teaching aids available in classrooms, such as instructional videos, language labs, and recording cassettes (Al-Mutairi, 2008; Al-Rashidi, 2015). There is also the challenge of traditional teaching techniques like rote memorisation and the use of Arabic rather than English for explanations, which puts teacher-centred education against student-centred learning (Al-Rashidi, 2015).

It is well-recognised that people residing in rural and remote places have limited access to resources and opportunities compared to those living in cities (Dew et al., 2018). However, several factors greatly impact the lives of those residing in remote areas. One of these factors is insufficient infrastructure. Rural infrastructure and modernisation levels contribute

to the advancement of rural development (Du & Jiao, 2023), including basic services, distance to specialised services, and lack of opportunity (Ma et al., 2022). Inadequate healthcare and educational facilities in these areas further restrict residents' opportunities for social and economic progress (Song, 2023).

Education has always been regarded as a means to promote social progress. However, English teachers in isolated communities face challenges, including the persistent lack of educational options and resources in rural regions (Tang, 2023). The lack of classroom resources has been identified as a grave challenge (Premovic, 2016). Barriers to professional growth and a lack of community or parental support have also been identified as significant challenges (Hurley, 2018). Additionally, they struggle to motivate students due to their diminished interest in English compared to other languages or their mother tongue (Malik et al., 2022; Tiwari, 2020).

Learners also struggle with English competency due to their dependency on native tongues (Shan & Aziz, 2022). Financial difficulties faced by students and their families may limit their ability to purchase essential educational supplies, hence impacting student achievement (Shang & Li, 2022). The inability to match educational content with the local cultural context and linguistic disparities further contribute to students' disinterest (Shan & Aziz, 2022). Lack of sufficient community support can also disrupt students' motivation and development of English language proficiency (Hardré, 2011). Thus, it is important to address these challenges in order to improve the standard of English instruction in isolated communities. Community cooperation and local solutions may also be helpful in this regard.

Rural areas have been extensively investigated in the literature; however, very little is known about the educational outcomes of remote schools in Hail. English teachers in remote schools shoulder great responsibilities. They are essential in facilitating the teaching and learning process and are indispensable to its success. As a result, educators are required to impart knowledge more imaginatively and creatively. This study aimed to ascertain the difficulties educators face when instructing English in remote areas of Hail City.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. According to Liu (2023), sociocultural theory highlights how teaching and learning are interactive processes influenced by cultural effects and social interaction. Teaching EFL in remote areas sheds light on how the cultural and social aspects impact the challenges faced in this context. This theory illustrates that learning will never happen in an empty place, and every learning environment is unique and not comparable to others, thereby exerting its own effects on the learning process. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory strongly emphasises the role of social and cultural interaction in the learning process. By applying this theory to the challenges educators face in remote areas, it becomes clear that social and cultural variables, in addition to curricula and educational resources, impact these problems (Sholeh, 2022). English may be rarely used in everyday life in isolated areas, discouraging people from learning the language. Instructors may find it difficult to engage students or offer learning opportunities pertinent to their everyday lives. Thus, the sociocultural theory holds that learning is shaped by the social and cultural environment in which it occurs (Jaramillo, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). The theory also highlights the significance of interpersonal interaction in the learning process. Therefore, training teachers and developing their skills through programmes that reflect local context needs can enhance teaching effectiveness (Jaramillo, 1996).

In remote villages, schools may lack the necessary educational tools and sufficient support from the local community and family. These elements make it more difficult for teachers to employ effective teaching techniques, making teaching English more challenging. Additionally, students' learning and engagement can be increased by incorporating aspects of the local culture into English classes (Ratri, 2024). This makes education more relevant and meaningful to the students. Through the lens of this theory, the research can provide a deep understanding of the specific challenges and offer insights into teaching strategies suitable for the current situation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Design*

This study uses a constructivist approach that can be studied and examined through a qualitative inquiry (Chai et al., 2013). This qualitative study used individual interviews to examine participants' perceptions and beliefs concerning the obstacles and challenges associated with teaching EFL in remote areas in Hail City. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), the goal of qualitative research is to understand the meanings and interpretations individuals attribute to their experiences by investigating events in their natural environments. This study's use of individual interviews enables a comprehensive investigation of the teachers' opinions and impressions of the challenges they face when instructing EFL in rural locations. In addition to capturing a wide range of individual experiences, this approach offers context-specific insights that can guide practice and policy. The creation of focused initiatives to address the particular demands and obstacles educators face in comparable situations can benefit from such a comprehensive analysis.

B. *Research Instrument*

Research instruments are the tools used by researchers to gather and generate data, which is anticipated to be in empirical form. These instruments are designed in alignment with the chosen research methods or data collection techniques (Gallant & Luthy, 2020). In this research, the researcher was involved in collecting data directly. After

obtaining the ethics approval from the Hail University Research Ethics Committee (REC), approval was granted for the study (approval No. H-2024-412). Standards of ethics were strictly adhered to during the entire research process. Eight semi-structured individual interviews were conducted physically in remote schools. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes. The researcher assured adherence to ethical guidelines. After obtaining permission, the interviews were conducted in a private room in the school (secretary room and empty classes). The interviews were recorded for accuracy purposes and then transcribed by the researcher. The researcher travelled to five remote schools in the Hail region and met teachers individually after obtaining their consent. The study employed purposeful sampling of eight EFL teachers in remote schools in Hail, Saudi Arabia.

C. Data Analysis

The individual interviews were conducted in Arabic, as it is the native language of the author and participants. The researcher used NVivo software by QSR International Pty Ltd., a sophisticated instrument, to carefully analyse the data. This software is renowned for making qualitative data analysis easier, enabling researchers to find and investigate intricate patterns in huge datasets.

As the researcher specialises in EFL, the transcripts were translated into English. Afterwards, the translated transcripts were handed over to an expert in English translation to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Subsequently, the eight interviews were analysed following thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006).

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research was conducted in the most remote villages of Hail City, which are located more than 80 km north of the city centre. In this study, the researcher conducted individual interviews with teachers who hold a bachelor's degree in English teaching and have been teaching in remote schools in Hail for several years. Based on the results examined, the following sociocultural challenges were identified as barriers to teaching and learning EFL at schools in remote areas of Hail.

A. Religious Conservatism and Cultural Differences

Religious effects against learning English in remote schools and cultural differences were the most common themes in teachers' data (26 references). Five teachers mentioned that students' families in remote areas are known for their religious traditionalism. This affects their children's beliefs and attitudes towards learning English. They are also strict about learning a foreign language that is not Arabic. Arabic is the language of Islam in which the Qur'an was revealed (Oasilan, 2009). Ibtisam commented: "I suffer from this belief; some children are already filled with this wrong thought, and as a result, we see children with a low motivation to learn English".

Two teachers explained that students come to schools with the belief that English is the language of the disbeliever's people and that those who learn English lack understanding of the Islamic religion. This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which asserts that cultural and religious activities play an important role in shaping an individual's way of thinking, their understanding of the world, and how they learn (Vygotsky, 1978). Nada mentioned:

I remember having an excellent student who had been rewarded by other teachers in other subjects in the school, but she was not as good and active in my class. When I suddenly point at her to answer or read aloud, she is very good. One day, I asked her why she was neither participating nor active in class despite her intelligence. She told me that English is not an Islamic language and that her family and relatives informed her that learning English is useless and should be banned from schools.

Fatimah mentioned that learning English has been improving in remote areas if students were not threatened by their families from learning it because of the same belief. This is consistent with research conducted by Gusmuliana et al. (2023) in Indonesia, which demonstrates how attitudes towards the language and culture impact students studying at Islamic institutions or "pesantren" learning a foreign language like English. This is especially true in settings where strict Islamic principles are more deeply embedded. In addition, the language's intimate relationship with Christianity may also explain why many Muslims have historically disliked it (Farid & Lamb, 2020).

According to a prior study, the fear of learning EFL presents a significant barrier for target language learners who fear losing their identity (Rahmat, 2019). Similarly, three teachers described that cultural impact is a big obstacle while teaching EFL in remote areas. They noted that students and their families fear losing their Arabic identity when learning a foreign language such as English. They believe learning English will weaken their Arabic language proficiency and make them less interested in their original culture. Ibtisam described the nature of these remote areas as 'Bedouin', which refers to nomadic Arab people found in the desert of the Middle East and are known for their distinctive harsh culture (Weber, 2018). Ibtisam mentioned that they are very strict about their values and customs, and as such, they cannot easily change their beliefs about something they believe contradicts their customs and values. The participant commented further:

Students and their families see English as a borrowed language that may affect their Arabic identity. In a community of Bedouin, they may feel 'ashamed' speaking English in front of their families and friends, or they cannot utter one word in English while others are speaking Arabic. They see this as a shame and may restrict someone from speaking English or practising it as this is against their culture or unnecessary.

This is also similar to Ortiz García and Pinilla's (2023) study, which examined rural families in isolated areas and found that they have a misconception about education. Layla commented:

Most of the time, students' families prohibit them from watching English cartoons or programmes on TV without direct translation into Arabic or dubbing. As a result, they lost the benefit of the main English sounds and aim of the language. Instead, they only focus on the Arabic translation and dubbing sound instead of watching it in English. Consequently, when students encounter the English language at school, it is often their first exposure.

Layla further commented: "They already have low proficiency in English". The participant refers to this as one of the effects of low student proficiency in English. This confirmed the result of the literature that learners should be extensively exposed to English since it is an essential factor in learning EFL (An Giang, 2022).

According to Mat Razi and Rahmat (2020), a new language cannot be learned without an understanding of the culture in which the target language is used. They assert that learners should be familiar with the target language's culture. From the standpoint of the learning process, students should integrate their own culture with English culture to improve their comprehension of the language. However, if they solely employ foreign culture during the learning process, they may become less motivated to study the language.

It is important to dispel this misconception and concern by highlighting the importance of learning English as a foreign language and how it does not threaten their cultural backgrounds, Arabic identity, or mother Arabic language. Awareness of learning English without any negative effect on current values and beliefs will help learners understand and overcome their fear of the obstacles of learning English.

B. Lack of Family and Environment Support

This was the second common theme from analysing teachers' data (22 references). Three teachers mentioned that the environment is not conducive to learning English due to a lack of family and environment support. For instance, families are not supporting their children with devices and tools rich in teaching English. They noted a lack of English-language programmes for children to watch at home due to geographic remoteness. Seham stated:

Nowadays, it is rare to find a child without an iPod, iPad, or any kind of device at home to play with. Still, it is uncommon for families to let their children download learning apps such as alphabetical or colour teaching apps. When I ask them what apps they use at home, I see the main focus is watching YouTube for trendy Arabic cartoons. They did not find support from families to give them an idea about English before coming to school. I observed that they are already skilled in Arabic basics but lack English skills.

In contrast, two teachers mentioned that the low economic and financial status of families in remote areas hindered students' progress in learning English. Specifically, these families are unable to afford electronic devices that would expose their children to English language components. This justification was mentioned in the literature by Hoque (2018). According to Hoque (2018), students from wealthy homes have greater access to resources, such as a variety of books and materials, in a cosy home setting, which fosters their positive attitudes towards learning English. Ibtisam recalled her previous teaching experience at a remote school six years ago:

I remember a student in intermediate school saying all her friends had no laptops except her, and all her classmates had a TV with only the Saudi Chanel and a few Arabic channels. So, she was dealing with English easily and was motivated to learn the language. She was very smart. When I inquired further, I found that she listened to English songs and watched some English movies on her laptop. Therefore, environmental conduciveness plays a significant role in easing or making language difficult.

This finding justifies the study of Athiyyaturrahmah et al. (2023), who clarified that students with good English skills mostly live in the city, while students in remote schools tend to be less proficient in English due to a lack of family and environment support.

Manal stated that the main issue is that most parents in remote areas are illiterate. They do not have the ability to support their children's learning, such as foreign language. Consequently, they are unable to assist their children with homework, monitor their progress, or understand the challenges they experience due to a lack of knowledge. In addition, they are indifferent to their children's learning. They do not place any value on learning itself, regardless of any subject. They are also unable to motivate their children based on their illiteracy and inability to attach importance to learning in general. Nasution et al. (2021) claim that a child's chances of achieving academic success decrease if their parents are inattentive and do not even have the time to educate them.

Another challenge identified is limited external interaction. Two teachers noted that geographic distance (remoteness) isolates learners from practising English with foreigners. They mentioned that lack of interaction with native speakers and language exposure is a big obstacle in remote schools. Moreover, practising English and making it a real-life context that can be produced and received simultaneously is crucial. According to Layla,

I can tell that I am teaching effectively, and my classes are interactive. However, without practising English outside of the classroom, this may be a big obstacle. The students do not practise outside the classroom or in their daily routine, making them lag a little behind.

It was found that the primary environmental factor contributing to the inadequate development of EFL learners' language skills in EFL settings was a lack of practice both inside and outside the classroom (Seraj & Hadina, 2021). Moreover, limited exposure has an impact on English language learners as it reduces their opportunities to practise and use the language in natural settings (Mudra, 2024).

A lack of environmental stimulation was found to be a challenge in teaching EFL in remote areas. Two teachers mentioned that remote villages lack a rich environment that is full of cultural experiences related to the English language, which may cause obstacles regarding understanding and using the English language effectively. Seham illustrated the difference between urban and remote areas:

Urban areas are full of different cultures that may be found everywhere and anytime daily, and anyone can hear the English language by chance in different places. However, this is not the same in remote areas, which tend to be more traditional and closely knit.

According to Methal,

The influence of the community can weaken language skills. Students are affected by their surroundings, where most communities have limited English proficiency due to the lack of environments requiring its use. In contrast, cities, with their universities, institutes, factories, large markets, hotels, and hospitals, expose people to diverse cultures and necessitate the use of the language, often compelling them to use it without hesitation.

The sociocultural theory emphasised the importance of interaction between the environment and learners, as well as how their surroundings play a big role in language learning (Bi, 2023). This challenge can be addressed by enhancing online training programmes to stimulate investment in small, leading projects in remote areas. In addition, improving the infrastructure of remote areas and providing work opportunities through the Internet can enhance and support English learning by fostering a better and more conducive environment.

C. Awareness Gap of Future Opportunities

This theme was less evident in teachers' data (18 references). Two teachers mentioned that competition is high in urban areas, whereas experience is more important in rural villages. This factor made students in remote areas less motivated since there is no encouragement to make them compete with each other, and job opportunities are lower than in urban areas. There may be a lack of job opportunities requiring English language skills, which also reduces their motivation to learn the language.

Mariam illustrated that students do not see attractive opportunities due to the surrounding social environment and lack of encouragement from parents and the environment itself. Methal mentioned that a lack of awareness of the benefits indicates that students may not fully understand the importance of learning a foreign language and its future opportunities. According to Manal,

Ambition plays a crucial role in motivating students to study and excel. A lack of ambition can result in poor academic performance and slow progress in language learning. The absence of successful role models who have achieved success using a foreign language may diminish students' motivation. Additionally, the surrounding environment and the lack of clear goals and specific ambitions can lead to a reduced commitment to lessons and language-related activities, resulting in a decline in skill levels.

Mariam commented that the absence of role models, including successful people from rural areas who have acquired English and succeeded, might lower students' ambitions and give them the impression that their ambitions are unachievable. She also mentioned that a lack of understanding of the language's significance might demotivate students in rural areas since they may not see the advantages of learning the language or the opportunities it will present to them later in life. Mariam further emphasised that the lack of local career prospects significantly impacts learning English. Methal illustrated that students might feel that studying the language has no immediate value in rural places with few job options requiring English language proficiency, which impacts their desire.

Based on Zhang's (2023) findings, English language learners' learning outcomes are directly impacted by their learning environment. Fatimah illustrated that local knowledge saturation significantly impacts EFL learning. She mentioned that students in rural locations may feel that learning English has no immediate advantage to their daily lives or future jobs due to the low use of the language in their local contexts. Fatimah also mentioned that there is a lack of personal appreciation: "If a kid does not receive appropriate encouragement from the community, they may lack the moral support that improves their ambition". She further noted that "students' motivation may suffer if their experience of studying English is unpleasant or discouraging as a result of inadequate instruction or a lack of comprehension of the subject matter." Another teacher pointed out that a major contributing element is rural students' obsession with everyday living, which can lead to a lack of homework follow-up and absorption in the language.

In second or foreign language learning, motivation to learn English and explaining its advantages for future prompts is an important factor contributing to the success of learning languages (Riyanti, 2019). Ulfa and Bania (2019) argue that the biggest element affecting students' motivation in EFL learning comes from the teachers themselves.

Language teachers should also recognise that their role extends beyond simply motivating their students (Rahman & Sahayu, 2020). Raising awareness of the value of English, improving instructional materials, and providing students with positive role models and useful experiences are all necessary to increase motivation and ambition.

D. Geographic Distance and Resource Constraints

The theme of geographic remoteness and resource constraints was the least common in teachers' data (11 references). Two teachers mentioned that the frequency of teachers' absences due to long travel distances is one of the obstacles affecting EFL teaching in remote areas. The remote schools in which the study was conducted are far from the centre of Hail, ranging from 70 km to 200 km. Teachers were asked about the cost of their transportation or whether they live in

those remote areas, but all four teachers answered they travel by car every day. Two teachers mentioned that this made them negligent in attending school as much as possible. Manal mentioned that while they were absent one day, the school provided another teacher who gave them free play time in the class without engaging them in any learning or teaching activities. The teacher simply ensured that the students did not create any disturbance during their free time because their teacher was absent. This is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which recommends that continuous interaction between teacher and student is crucial in sociocultural settings for effective learning as the teacher's presence is significant in guiding the students in their learning and offering continuous support even if the students work independently (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Three teachers mentioned that the lack of professional development related to English teaching is one of the challenges due to the long distances. Nada shared her experience of never having an opportunity to attend a workshop or training institute in remote areas. She commented: "Limiting professional development and training programs that focus on the latest English teaching strategies can be a barrier to improving educational quality". This finding aligns with Shang and Xie (2019), who found that those in this region are typically more receptive to innovative pedagogy compared to EFL teachers in more rural traditional cities.

The difficulty teachers have accessing advanced training programs due to the remoteness of rural areas may limit their ability to enhance their language teaching skills. Two teachers mentioned that attracting and retaining qualified English teachers can be challenging in remote villages. A shortage of specialised teachers means that students may receive inadequate or ineffective education. Mariam stated:

I asked one of my students in year 11 about the reasons for her low level in English. She mentioned that she was taught English in year 11 by a math teacher since the school was very far away. Hence, they could not employ an English teacher, and there was a shortage of other teachers because of the remoteness of the school.

Similar to the literature, which found that lack of resources is regarded as one of the challenges faced by remote schools due to geographic remoteness (Ajani, 2023), Fatimah indicated that the school's economic conditions and logistical challenges, including limited financial resources, could impact teaching EFL. In addition, the availability of necessary educational tools or materials, improvements to the learning environment, and providing quality infrastructure, such as technology labs or libraries, are essential for practical English lessons.

This shortage hinders continued social interaction and a successful learning process, which is central to Vygotsky's theory (Shi, 2017). This theory emphasises the importance of social support and learning resources, as the lack of these resources can hinder learning opportunities and cognitive development.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study highlights important challenges EFL teachers in Hail City's rural schools must overcome. These challenges include religious traditionalism, a lack of environment and family support system, a lack of awareness of future opportunities, geographic remoteness, and resource constraints. These challenges affect teachers' productivity and morale, which in turn affects how well students learn. The study's limitations, however, are its reliance on qualitative data and limited regional emphasis, which might not adequately represent the larger educational setting. To provide more comprehensive insights, future research should explore comparative studies across various locations and incorporate quantitative metrics. To further address these challenges and raise the standard of education, it may be helpful to investigate methods for boosting teacher support and engagement in remote locations.

The study emphasises the significance of allocating more funds towards instructional materials for remote schools in order to close the gap between urban and rural environments and ensure education equity. It is also crucial to supply sufficient resources, infrastructure, and technology. The unique challenges of remote locations can be addressed by providing professional development programmes for EFL teachers, with an emphasis on doable solutions to resource constraints, student motivation and engagement, and instructional modification. Technology integration, supportive learning communities, and culturally appropriate content can help to increase student motivation in remote learning situations. Innovative approaches, including virtual collaboration, mobile resource units, and remote teacher training, are needed to address geographic isolation. Ultimately, focused interventions and support systems are required to guarantee students in these communities' fair educational opportunities.

The research suggests that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory needs to adapt to the issues of remote educational settings. It highlights that effective learning in isolated areas requires not just social interaction and cultural relevance but also equitable access to resources and support. Therefore, the theory should consider geographic and socioeconomic factors to address the complexities faced by educators and learners in these environments.

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