



Challenges Faced by Language Learning Disabilities Primary Students in Learning English as Second Language

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Abstract: *This paper reports on a study carried out to explore challenges faced by primary level Language Learning Disabilities (LDs) students in learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in Pakistan. The data was collected through a quantitative (close-ended) questionnaire filled in by 100 and a qualitative (open-ended) questionnaire filled by 10 Primary English language teachers in Pakistan. The findings revealed that language LDs hinder the development of literacy and oral skills of primary ESL learners. The study concluded that in order to improve the English language learning of students with language LDs, there is a need to assure the provision of teacher training facilities, application of sensorial activities, and establishment of good rapport between the teaching staff, school administration and parents of students with language LDs.*

Key Words: Language Learning Disabilities, ESL Learning, Primary School Students, Receptive Language, Productive Language, Pakistan

Introduction

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA, 2019), learning disabilities (LDs) are problems that affect the brain's ability to acquire, process, comprehend, analyze, or store information and produce the language. These problems can make it difficult for a student to learn as quickly as someone who is not affected by LDs. According to National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2017), the symptoms of LDs are highly evident at the elementary level, especially from grade 1-4. Children with LDs are often considered lazy or slow learners, and the chief reason for that particular issue is the lack of teachers' and parents' awareness of LDs amongst these children. LDs are apparent in individuals when they struggle in speaking, writing, reading, communicating, or become an attention deficit. Generally, LDs in students get diagnosed at the initial stage of schooling when the parents or teachers observe variations in a child's behaviour. Some of the children with LDs develop manipulated behaviour and sophisticated ways of covering up their learning issues, so the problem does not get addressed until the teen years when life gets more complicated.

Kirk was the first person who used the term "learning disability" in 1963. The terms Learning Disability', 'Learning Difficulty' & 'Intellectual Disability' are often used interchangeably. Most of the organizations in the UK are using the term "learning disabilities", whereas many international organizations in Canada and the USA use the term "intellectual disability" instead. In the USA, learning disabilities are referred to as specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. According to the updated definition of learning disabilities presented by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 2016):

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Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are innate to the individual, which are assumed to be occurring because of central nervous system dysfunction and may happen across the life span. Individuals with learning disabilities may face problems in self-monitoring their behaviours, social awareness and interaction as well. Learning disability may occur parallel to other impairments, for example, sensory impairments, sight issues, intellectual impairments or sometimes hyperactivity and emotional disturbance, but they do not occur under the influences of these conditions or impairments.

[Kemp, Smith and Segal, \(2018\)](#) suggest that learning disability is not a problem with intelligence or motivation. They posit that children with LDs are not dumb; rather, their brains are simply wired differently. In fact, most are just as smart as others. This change marks how they acquire and process information. In this regard, children with dyslexia have difficulty with reading, writing, spelling, and formations. On the other hand, dyscalculia is about difficulty with mathematics. Those suffering from dyscalculia often get stuck doing math problems and numeracy concepts. Dysgraphia presents problems with handwriting, spelling, and organization of ideas. Dyspraxia is the difficulty with fine motor skills, which includes problems with hand-eye coordination and balance. Dysphasia/Aphasia is the difficulty of the language. It includes failure or slow processing of language acquisition and production. Children with Auditory Processing Disorder face difficulty in identifying differences between sounds which extends to the problem in comprehension. Visual Processing Disorder is the difficulty in interpreting visual information, which includes reading text, math, maps, charts, symbols and pictures. Lastly, children with Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often have problems in sitting still, focusing, following instructions, staying organized, and completing homework ([Kemp et al., 2018](#)).

Early Warning Signs of Learning Disabilities

It is stated in the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities (2019) that acknowledging the warning signs of LDs and fostering children with the necessary help early on can be a key to a child's future. Children with LDs basically process information differently. Many children and adults with LDs remain undiagnosed, which results in low self-esteem, motivation, lack of interest and hyperactivity. Early warning signs in Pre-school include less interaction with peers, slow vocabulary growth, pronunciation problems, difficulties in learning letters of alphabet and numbers. Early warning signs in Kindergarten through fourth grade include impulsiveness, unawareness of physical surroundings, less pace in processing new information, reading and spelling errors, confusion in basic describing words, poor alphabet sequencing, retention of phonemes, and unstable pencil grip ([LD Online, 2019](#)).

Knowledge and Presence of LDs

Teachers can play a vital role in identifying and supporting students with LDs. To fulfil this important role, it is imperative for teachers to have explicit knowledge about LDs. [Al Khatib \(2007\)](#) examined the Jordanian teachers' knowledge of LDs and found that teachers had a moderate level of knowledge of LDs. [Aladwani and Shaye \(2013\)](#) inspected Kuwaiti primary school teachers' knowledge and awareness about the children suffering from the learning impairment of dyslexia. The authors found that the teachers had enough awareness regarding this problem, but due to lack of time and jam-packed school routines, they were not able to help those students.

[Sharma and Samuel \(2013\)](#) investigated awareness about learning impairments of 100 teachers from private English medium schools in Ludhiana, Punjab, India. The results suggested that teachers claimed to have ample knowledge regarding LDs, but after the survey, it was evident that they just had an ambiguous picture about it. Even the teachers blamed students' behaviours and family background for poor performance in their studies. [Waqar and Vazir \(2010\)](#) argued about the awareness and understanding of LDs in Pakistani classrooms and highlighted common beliefs and practices of teachers related to students with learning impairments. The authors suggested some strategies to help teachers to address the problems of children with LDs, such as the need for teachers to be aware of these LDs.

In a case study by [Luxy \(2016\)](#), a Clinical Psychologist, a child named Sunny (a grade 2 student) had difficulty in sound-letter agreement, alphabet sequencing and construction of words and was not able to participate in class activities at his best due to these problems. The parents were suggested to visit a clinical psychologist for the identification of his LDs. The psychological assessment proved that Sunny had a mild level of LD. Parents were counselled and advised to seek further help from a special educator. With help, Sunny made evident progress, started participating in classroom activities, was motivated to put in extra effort and resultantly had growth in his grades. It is evident from the findings from the aforementioned prior studies that teachers find difficulty in identifying the LD students in their classrooms. Even if they do identify them, they do not have proper resources and guidance to meet the need of these students.

Identification of LD in Second Language Learning/Acquisition

ESL learners are often stigmatized with LDs in mainstream classrooms due to the perceptions and knowledge of teachers. Unfortunately, there is no proper assessment tool that can help teachers to identify whether a child is suffering from a language learning process problem or actually having an LD. According to [Pierangelo and Giuliani \(2010\)](#), five percent of all school-age children in public schools suffer from LD. Over half of all students with an LD have a language-based LD, where the majority of them face challenges in reading.

For various different reasons, LD students and ESL learners are at risk of lower achievement in literacy and language. According to [Spear-Swerling \(2006\)](#), when an English language learner appears to be an LD student, then the process of identification and intervention becomes highly difficult and challenging. It becomes difficult to distinguish and identify either a child is suffering from an LD or just facing a language learning problem in the context of second language learning and acquisition. [Duquette and Land \(2014\)](#) also highlighted the same issues a learner has to face while learning a new language and the challenge of identifying an actual problem they encounter which is either a disability or just a struggling with a new language.

It was proposed by [Klingner and Eppolito \(2014\)](#) that to identify whether a child is having an LD or a language acquisition problem, it is important to observe the second language acquisition (SLA) process, LD characteristics, and the medium or quality of instruction in the mainstream classrooms. The authors recommended using the hypothesis-driven approach to determine whether an English language learner has an LD or not. This approach should include external and environmental factors, too, because sometimes a student just needs more support in language learning. Likewise, the environment may also not be conducive to learning.

According to [Bernstein and Cloud \(2005\)](#), in the case of LDs in English language learners, before recommending a child with special education needs, it is important to identify an actual problem faced by the child. Firstly, there is the need to observe the nature of problems that exist in second language learning and see if they also exist in native language acquisition or not. Assessments in the native language, observations, student interaction with peers in the native language, and family interview are helpful. Then there is the need to look for indicators proposed by [Brice and Roseberry-McKibbin \(1999\)](#) that may depict a genuine disability.

- Even within the guidance, a learner faces difficulty in learning new concepts, and this struggle is not only evident in the second language but also apparent in the first language.
- Insufficient vocabulary in the first language.
- The problem in communicating with peers and family members of the same cultural and linguistic background.
- Check disability history in the family.
- Slower development is comparable to other siblings.
- Excessive use of gestures and less use of speech, which is a common pattern in the first language as well.
- Requirement of continuous repetition and prompting (verbal and gestural prompts).

- Difficulty in following directions.

LDs Associated with the Four Basic Language Skills

The four basic skills of the English language include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and reading are receptive skills, whereas speaking and writing are productive skills ([Morehouse, 2017](#)). Receptive skills are associated with the receiving of language input, and productive skills involve the production of language. To get overall command of the English language, it is very important to get fluency in the four basic English language skills. In listening, which is a receptive and passive skill, a person uses their ears to hear and brain to process the input they receive in the form of words or sounds, or simply language. In speaking, which is a productive and active skill, a person uses their vocal tracts for the articulation and their brain to put together their ideas into a spoken discourse. The third skill of reading is again passive and receptive in nature, and in reading, a person makes use of eyes and brain to understand the written text. The fourth basic language skill is writing, which is a productive and active skill, as it requires the use of hands and brain to produce the written symbols that represent the spoken language ([Morehouse, 2017](#)). The LDs associated with the four basic language skills respectively are dyslexia (reading), dysorthographia (spelling), dysgraphia (writing), and language processing disorder (listening and speaking). At the same time, the use of digital media/multimediality can also help such students' learn better ([Baig, 2014](#)).

Dyslexia (Reading)

According to [Pierangelo and Giuliani \(2008\)](#), a learning disability specifically associated with reading is known as dyslexia. Students suffering from dyslexia find difficulty in comprehending the text while reading. They often get confused with the spelling of words. They make delay in the language learning process and own a limited vocabulary. Sometimes these students are unable to understand sarcasm, puns, jokes, and comic strips. They face difficulty in retelling a story in sequential or chronological order. The symptoms of dyslexia are not the same in every child. They differ from person to person, but the most evident and common symptoms include difficulties with phonological processing and rapid visual-verbal responding ([Strokes, 2007](#)).

Dysorthographia (Spelling)

Students suffering from dysorthographia make spelling errors that include addition or omission of letters, reversal of vowels and syllabus. They also face difficulty in understanding the sound-letter agreement and relation ([Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008](#)).

Dysgraphia (Writing)

Students with dysgraphia produce untidy or sometimes incorrect work. This LD is more evident in young learners when they are introduced to writing. They feel difficulty in distinguishing letter formation lines, for example, slant line, standing line, etc. ([Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008](#)). These students write double spaced and sometimes very tiny letters. They find difficulty in writing on lines and in-between the margins. They have unusual grip and frequently keep talking to themselves while writing. Dysgraphic students produce unfinished letters or words. These students learn less from classroom assignments or tasks because their primary focus is writing. In their struggle of producing neat work, they miss the real content to be learnt ([Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2008](#)).

Language Processing Disorder (Listening and Speaking)

According to [LDA \(2019\)](#), “auditory processing disorder (APD) affects the interpretation of all sounds coming into the brain” and “Language Processing Disorder (LPD) relates only to the processing of language (n.p.). LPD can affect expressive language (speaking) and receptive language (listening) ([LDA, 2019](#)). People with expressive language (speaking) disorders have a difficult time expressing their thoughts and ideas through a medium of verbal communication. On the other hand, people with receptive language (listening) disorders struggle to understand what others are saying or to follow a

conversation. It is also possible for them to suffer from a combination of expressive (speaking) and receptive language (listening) disorders ([Understood, 2019](#)).

LD influence on English Language Skills (Literacy and Oral)

LDs have a great impact on the development of literacy and oral skills in second language learning as well as in the first language. The study of LDs in the context of second language learning is important because, through research on learning disabilities, we can develop a better understanding of the cognitive factors that can influence the development of language skills. The two major theories in the context of cognitive development were proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky. They both saw a child as an active learner in the language learning process. According to Piaget (1936), a child develops her own significance and makes meaning through investigation and relates her existing knowledge to the new knowledge. On the other hand, Vygotsky (1978) saw a child in a social context. According to him, a child adapts better when she is able to convey her knowledge. Another significant part of Vygotsky's hypothesis was Progressively Learned Others (MKO) which proposes that grown-ups give a framework to a youngster to achieve the zone of proximal advancement (ZPD).

The existing literature shows that students with LD face difficulty in second language learning, especially in the development of reading skills which influences the development of other language skills as well ([Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2010](#)). The research conducted on children with LD in Norway ([Helland & Kaasa, 2005](#)) and Hungary ([Kormos & Csizér, 2010](#)) concluded that students with a specific learning disability (dyslexia) achieved less on a test of ESL word reading compared to their non-dyslexic peers.

Students with LD face problem in the development of productive skills as well, chiefly writing. The prominent cognitive characteristics that affect the performance of writers with LD include reduced working memory and phonological awareness. Research conducted in Canada by [Ndlovu and Geva \(2008\)](#) concluded that LD students struggle with lower-level and higher-level aspects of writing as well as the overall composition of a written piece of work. The lower-level aspects include syntax, spelling and punctuation, whereas higher-level aspects include generation and coordination of vocabulary.

A number of studies indicate that the spelling skills of young English language learners with specific learning disabilities (SLD) are also below those who do not have an SLD ([Helland & Kaasa, 2005](#); [Ndlovu and Geva \(2008\)](#); [Kormos & Csizér, 2010](#)). The literature proposes that the effects of LDs on the oral skills of second language students vary in different contexts. The research conducted in Norway concluded that second language students had the same performance as their fellows who do not have any LD ([Helland & Kaasa, 2005](#)). On the other hand, the research conducted in Hungary ([Kormos & Csizér, 2010](#)) revealed a significant difference in the performance of LD students. They secured lower oral performance scores compared to the students who did not have any LD. According to Agarwal (2007), the pre-requisites to educate a child with LDs include identification of learning disability, identification of specific learning disability, special educator, interaction with parents, and learning materials.

Due to less knowledge and limited resources, the individual needs of students with LDs are not being catered to in most of the countries, including Pakistan. A large body of research literature exists on the studies conducted on dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia within the classroom contexts, predominantly in the Western contexts. However, there is a dearth of research LDs of primary students' ESL learning in the Pakistani context. It is therefore important to explore Pakistani primary teachers' perceptions of LDs and the challenges faced by primary LD students in learning English as a second language.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach. Two questionnaires were developed in the English language for data collection: A quantitative (close-ended) questionnaire and a qualitative (open-ended) questionnaire—the quantitative questionnaire comprised two sections with a total of 35 items.

Section A consisted of Five items aimed at collecting demographic/background information of the study respondents. Section B consisted of 30 close-ended items, which were guided by the LDs checklist offered by National Center for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 2017), as well as on the information gleaned from the reviewed literature. In this section, the respondents were asked about the challenges Learning Disabilities presented in developing English language skills amongst primary ESL students, i.e. receptive (listening & reading) and productive (speaking & writing) skills. Out of the 30 items, 4 items highlighted the problems faced by LD students in listening and 11 items in reading (receptive skills), and 6 items represented LDs in speaking, and 9 items targeted difficulties in writing (productive skills), respectively. The responses on the questionnaire items were taken on a three-point Likert scale (1=Lower Level; 2=Moderate level; and 3= Slightly Higher) to gauge the extent of the level of challenges presented by LDs to primary level ESL learners. The qualitative questionnaire comprised 7 questions aimed at eliciting relevant information regarding the challenges faced by primary students with learning disabilities in ESL learning and the strategies used by the participant teachers to cater for the needs of LD students. Teachers' suggestions for dealing with the learning problems of students with LDs were also requested.

The quantitative sample consisted of 100 Primary English language teachers of Pakistani schools. The qualitative sample, on the other hand, consisted of 10 English language teachers with experience teaching students with LDs. Percentages and mean scores of the responses to each item of the quantitative questionnaire were analyzed for finding out the perceptions of the teachers regarding the challenges faced by LD students in the development of the four English language skills. A thematic analysis of the qualitative responses was carried out.

Findings and Discussion

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 presents the data on the demographic characteristics of the study respondents.

Table 1. Demographic data

No.	Demographic Characteristics	Percentage
1.	<i>Gender</i>	
	Female	98.0%
	Male	2.0%
2.	<i>Age</i>	
	20-30 years	54.0%
	31-40 years	36.0%
	41-50 years	10.0%
3.	<i>Academic qualification</i>	
	Bachelors	20.0%
	Masters	66.0%
	Other	14.0%
4.	<i>Experience in teaching LD students</i>	
	Yes	80.0%
	No	20.0%
5.	<i>Experience in dealing with LD students</i>	
	Less than 1 year	46.0%
	1-3 years	38.0%
	4-6 years	14.0%
	7-10 years	2.0%

The data were presented in separate tables for each of the levels of challenges faced by LD primary students in four English language skills. Table 2 presents results for the level of challenges faced in developing the listening skill of students with LDs.

Table 2. Challenges faced by LD Students in Developing Listening Skill

Items	L	M	H	Mean
1.1 LD students often misunderstand what is asked and answer or act inappropriately	10.0	42.0	48.0	2.46
1.2 Students with LDs face difficulty getting jokes	28.0	42.0	30.0	2.08
1.3 Students with LDs feel lost when listening to stories with lots of events and characters	24.0	32.0	44.0	2.44
1.4 Students with LDs face difficulty following directions	18.0	38.0	44.0	2.40

Note. L= Lower Level (1); M= Moderate Level (2); H= Higher Level (3)

The results show that the level of challenges faced by LDs students in the development of listening skills vary from low to high level. The respondents responded that LD students face comprehension issues and difficulty in understanding jokes at a moderate level. The listening comprehension issues further hinder their ability to understand commands and follow directions. According to the findings, the prevalence of getting lost within the stories and characters during storytelling was severe amongst students with LDs.

Table 3 presents results for the challenges faced by primary LD students in developing reading skill.

Table 3. Challenges faced by LD students in developing Reading Skill

Items	L	M	H	Mean
2.1 Students with LDs face difficulty recognizing and remembering sight words	18.0	44.0	38.0	2.18
2.2 Students with LDs confuse similar-looking letters and numbers	16.0	16.0	68.0	2.66
2.3 Students with LDs frequently lose place while reading	12.0	48.0	40.0	2.36
2.4 Students with LDs have weak comprehension of ideas and themes	36.0	24.0	40.0	2.14
2.5 Students with LDs have problems associating letter and sounds, understanding the difference between sounds in words or blending sounds into words	20.0	24.0	56.0	2.52
2.6 Students with LDs have difficulty with fluency while reading, and they read slowly	18.0	24.0	58.0	2.48
2.7 Students with LDs have difficulty with accuracy, and they substitute or leave out words while reading	22.0	18.0	60.0	2.54
2.8 Students with LDs have difficulty with sounding out (i.e. decoding) words	24.0	36.0	40.0	2.26
2.9 Students with LDs spell poorly and inconsistently (e.g. the same word appears differently at other places in the same document)	16.0	42.0	42.0	2.40
2.10 Students with LDs demonstrate delays in learning to copy and write	24.0	32.0	44.0	2.34
2.11 Students with LDs dislike and avoid reading or read reluctantly	18.0	36.0	46.0	2.40

Note. L= Lower Level (1); M= Moderate Level (2); H= Higher Level (3)

The results showed that LDs have a negative effect on the development of reading skills of primary students. According to the primary level English language teachers in this study, students with LDs face severe difficulty in recognizing and remembering similar-looking letters while reading. They also face hindrance with the fluency and accuracy of the reading material and struggle in the blending and segmenting of the words at a greater level. Further findings highlighted the dominance of other difficulties existing amongst students with LDs. These students were found to face difficulty in keeping track of the text while reading and represent weak comprehension of ideas at a moderate level. Reluctant behaviour amongst students with LDs is another common trait highlighted by the findings. LDs have major effects on the development of reading skills, and their prevalence is most common in the reading context amongst students with LDs, which is similar to the findings of [Pierangelo and](#)

[Giuliani \(2010\)](#), who concluded that reading skills get strongly affected by LDs which further lead to difficulty in the development of writing skills amongst such students.

Table 4 presents results for the challenges faced by LD students in the development of speaking skill.

Table 4. Challenges faced by LD Students in developing Speaking Skill

Items	L	M	H	Mean
3.1 Students with LDs repeat phrases when telling a story or answering a question	22.0	34.0	44.0	2.30
3.2 Students with LDs use generic language instead of a specific word (e.g. saying "the thing" instead of "the notebook")	16.0	42.0	42.0	2.34
3.3 Students with LDs mispronounce words frequently	16.0	46.0	38.0	2.30
3.4 Students with LDs have difficulty rhyming	12.0	60.0	28.0	2.20
3.5 LD students often seem frustrated by their inability to communicate thoughts	18.0	30.0	52.0	2.44
3.6 Students with LDs use a lot of filler words like "um," or use "stuff" and "things" instead of more specific words	26.0	38.0	36.0	2.24

Note. L= Lower Level (1); M= Moderate (2); H= Higher Level (3)

The LDs appeared to have moderate effects on the speaking skill of ESL primary students in this study. The findings showed that the use of more generic language and the repetition of phrases or events while retelling the story had an average occurrence amongst primary level LDs students. Difficulty with rhyming and the use of fillers during the conversation was also evident at a moderate level. The current findings highlighted the frustration level LDs students face when they feel unable to communicate their thoughts. According to the findings, this frustration exists at a severe Level amongst LDs students in ESL classrooms.

Table 5 presents results for the challenges faced by LD students in developing writing skill.

Table 5. Challenges faced by LD Students in developing Writing Skill

Items	L	M	H	Mean
4.1 LD students' writing is messy and incomplete, with many cross outs and erasures	20.0	26.0	54.0	2.42
4.2 Students with LDs have difficulty remembering shapes of letters and numerals	22.0	32.0	46.0	2.30
4.3 Students with LDs use uneven spacing between letters and words, and has trouble staying 'on the line'	24.0	22.0	54.0	2.54
4.4 Students with LDs expresses written ideas in a disorganized way	14.0	34.0	52.0	2.52
4.5 LD students' writing is illegible, inconsistent, and has poorly formed letters and numbers	16.0	30.0	54.0	2.50
4.6 Students with LDs have a tight or awkward pencil grip	32.0	30.0	38.0	2.08
4.7 Students with LDs have difficulty preparing outlines and organizing written assignments	16.0	30.0	54.0	2.54
4.8 Students with LDs fail to develop ideas in writing, so written work is incomplete and too brief	18.0	22.0	60.0	2.50
4.9 Students with LDs frequently reverse letters, numbers and symbols	22.0	38.0	40.0	2.28

Note. L= Lower Level (1); M= Moderate Level (2); H= Higher Level (3)

Along with speaking, challenges presented by LDs in the development of writing skills were also found to be noticeable amongst primary ESL learners. The current findings indicated that students with LDs struggle to produce organized and neat work. Students with LDs work is messy, incomplete and disorganized manner. These findings resonate with the findings of [Ndlovu and Geva \(2008\)](#), who reported that the effects of LDs are severe on writing skills, and LD students exhibit an awkward pencil grip and form incomplete or reversed letters.

Summing up, the quantitative findings revealed that LDs effects on the development of reading, listening, speaking, and writing was noticeable. Though the literature proposed that LDs have a dominant occurrence in reading context and hinder the development of reading skills at a much higher level, but from the current findings, it was evident that challenges presented by LDs to other skills are equally observable. Therefore, it is important to identify the actual type of LD amongst students with special needs. The effects of LDs on literacy skills (reading and writing) vary from moderate to severe. On the other hand, oral skills (listening and speaking) had moderate to mild effects on LDs.

Qualitative Findings

The first question on the qualitative questionnaire asked: “Have you ever received formal training or workshops regarding dealing with students with LD? If yes, then of what nature?” In response to this question, one theme which was common in the definitions of all respondents was “learning difficulties”. The majority of respondents (8/10) responded that LD is a difficulty with reading, writing, maths and spellings. Respondent one stated that “It is a difficulty in reading, correct pronunciation, and issues in understanding the meanings”. In view of respondent two, it is “difficulties in learning and using academic skills, for example, slow word reading and understanding and low mathematical reasoning”. From the data, it is evident that most of the respondents had opulent knowledge about LDs and their responses were similar to the findings of [Cunningham \(2017\)](#), who concluded: “A learning disability refers to weaknesses in certain academic skills. Reading, writing and math are the main ones” (n.p.).

Two respondents shed light on the other issues of memorization and retention as well. Respondent three expressed that “In my viewpoint, learning disabilities refer to the delay in learning or sometimes being unable to keep a piece of information in mind for a longer time”. Respondent four reported, “These students are unable to memorize lessons. If they learn English as a second language, sometimes they appear to be slow readers, lose words while writing and are unable to express what they think”.

Despite the fact that only two respondents reported having received formal training on dealing with LD students, the rest of the respondents also demonstrated a commendable understanding of LDs. These findings were different from the existing findings of [Sharma and Samuel \(2013\)](#), who contended that teachers in their study claimed to have enough knowledge and awareness about LD, and after the survey, the results revealed that they were not able to identify and classify LD students.

The second question was, “For how many years have you been teaching students with learning disabilities? And how many students with learning disabilities have you taught during your career”? The data revealed that 5/10 respondents’ experience ranged from 1 to 5 years and the rest of the five had experience ranging between 6 to 10 years. Respondent one responded, “I’ve been teaching for the last 7 years, and the number of LD students I have encountered so far is 8”. The findings show that 4/10 teachers had 10 years of experience and the number of children with LDs they encountered in their teaching career was more than 20 each. Respondent two said, “I’ve been teaching for almost 10 years now, and in each session, I have had 20-40% students with such problems”. Respondent three reported, “I have been dealing with LD students for about 10 years, and every year I encounter many students with LD”.

In response to question three, “What is the most common type of learning disability in students you have encountered in your teaching career as an English teacher”? There were similarities in the respondents’ statements. The majority of the respondents (9/10) responded that children face comprehension issues of the written and oral text. Moreover, they face problems in understanding and following directions. The findings revealed that the most common type of LD encountered by the English language teachers in this study is reading difficulty (dyslexia). Most of the respondents (7/10) responded that students with LD face difficulty in reading which eventually hinders their writing capabilities. This finding resonates with the findings of Pierangelo and Giuliani (2010), who documented that ESL learners with LD mostly face difficulty in the development of receptive skill (reading). A similar finding can be seen in the current study; for example, Respondent one reported that “LD students mostly face difficulty in phonics, blending, identification and recognition of letter or numbers”.

Further findings in relation to question three showed that the second most recurrent LD in ESL learners according to the study respondents is writing difficulty, where 5/10 teachers responded that students with LD struggle with spellings (dysorthographia) a lot as well as to draft their ideas on a piece of paper in a well-organized manner (dysgraphia). Previous research conducted by [Ndlovu and Geva \(2008\)](#) has documented a similar situation in a Canadian school where LD students faced difficulty in constructing the appropriate sentence structure and in spelling the words accurately. Similarly, in the current study, Respondent two reported, “LD students are unable to comprehend the written text, and that’s why they hesitate to read”.

Prior research has shown that the effects of LD on listening and speaking skills vary in different situations. Norway school students with LD were able to compete with fellow students who were not suffering from any LD on a test performance in [Helland & Kaasa, 2005](#) study. In the present study, some of the teachers (3/10) responded that students with LD face difficulty in comprehending the instructions. According to Respondent three, “English, being a foreign language for the young students is normally hard to comprehend and initially, they face difficulty in listening”. In a nutshell, the present research findings suggest that reading difficulties (dyslexia) have severe effects, writing difficulties (dysgraphia) have moderate to severe effects and listening difficulty (LPD) has mild effects on English as second language learning of students with LDs.

For question four, “What approach and medium of instruction do you use in your classroom?”, the similarity was evident in responses. Most of the respondents (8/10) reported that they use both English and Urdu as a medium of instruction. Respondent one responded, “I have been using English as a medium of instruction, but due to the requirements of institution and students, I switched to grammar-translation method”. Respondent two maintained: “I mostly use English as a medium of instruction and concept reinforcement in Urdu afterwards to provide clear understanding”. The existing literature suggests, sometimes a child is not learning disabled, rather s/he just suffers the problem in second language learning. For this concern, observation of second language acquisition and understanding of native language to a child is very important. If the problem prevails in a native language as well, then a child may be suffering from some LDs (Cloud & Bernstein, 2005).

In response to the approach teachers use within their classroom, a notable pattern was visible in this study. A major section of the respondents (7/10) responded that they use reinforcement and prompting as an approach to deal with learning disabled students and also provide individual attention. Respondent three responded, “I mostly use verbal prompts, gestural prompts, and physical prompts to help my students with LDs”. According to [Agrawal \(2007\)](#), the special educator is more important than special education. Students who are learning disabled can adjust and learn in inclusive classroom settings, but they require individual attention. In this regard, one to one interaction and reinforcement hold an absolute importance, as was noticed in the current study.

A few Respondents (3/10) highlighted the importance of activity-based and sensorial learning. According to them, it is important to engage LD students in fun tasks that can help them retain their attention and thus learn. According to Respondent four, “Apart from medical help, I make them involved in sensory material to reveal their anxiety faced by them in conventional learning areas”. The literature on pre-requisites and strategies to teach LD students suggests similar findings. For example, [Agarwal \(2007\)](#) posits that a multi-sensory approach must be used to educate learning-disabled children. The multi-sensory approach incorporates the learning styles for visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile approaches.

In response to the question “How important according to you is inclusive education?”, most of the respondents (7/10) responded that inclusive education is important for embracing diversity in the classrooms and that it helps learners to boost their confidence and socialize with peers. Respondent one wrote, “To a large extent, LD students should learn with their fellow students, and the teacher should take care of the fact that the LD students do not have to face problem with the class pace and learn things in a positive environment without being judged about their poor or low performance”. Respondent two responded, “According to the new educational approach, inclusive education is really

important. Researches have shown students learn better when they are more familiar with the casual environment and learn from peers”.

Stressing on the positive aspects of inclusive education, [Pavri and Luftig \(2010\)](#) argued that the inclusion of hampered students into the general classroom has not only brought about academic improvement, it likewise has offered the LD students the open door for socialization with their friends without hindrance in general classroom settings. In the current study, most of the respondents favoured inclusive education, and only a few respondents (3/10) emphasized the need for special education. According to the special education is needed for LD students so they can get individual attention which is crucial for their development. Respondent three responded, “In my view, students with learning disabilities must be dealt in special schools with different strategies, separate from normal children”. According to Respondent four: “Not inclusive but special education is important so that the children can get special attention and care”.

With regard to question six, “What strategies do you use for catering students with a learning disability?”, two major themes emerged. The most prominent theme was “therapy and counselling”. Half of the teachers (5/10) responded that they use occupational therapy and behavioural therapy to deal with LD students. Respondent one reported, “I use occupational therapy and behavioral therapy to deal with LD students”. Occupational therapy is defined by [Law, Steinwender and Leclair \(1998\)](#) as tasks and activities related to daily routines, for example, eating food, playing, cooking, or communicating with friends. According to the authors, these kinds of activities help in the development of gross motor skills, which eventually help in the development of receptive and productive skills. In the current study, Respondent two responded, “Sensorial activities and the correction of error help a lot to deal LD students,” which is relatable to the findings of [Skinner \(1948\)](#), who proposed the theory of behaviorism and found that the inclusion and exclusion of responses can be determined by way of reinforcement, or rewards ([McLeod, 2014](#)).

The second theme that was evident from the rest of the 5 respondents was the use of motivation. Respondent three expressed, “Children with learning disabilities are smarter like their peers. They can overcome difficulties in reading and writing if they are given opportunities of reasoning and recalling, and by letting them figure out things on their own”. This finding is similar to the work on cognitive development done by Jean Piaget (1934). According to him, a child is continuously constructing meaning and relates his prior knowledge to the new knowledge. In the current study, Respondent four said, “Most of the times I try to give them separate time. Also, I try to make them sit with bright students to motivate them”. This finding is similar to the more knowledgeable other (MRO) element of Vygotsky’s theory (1934), which refers to a person who has more knowledge than the learner. It could be a teacher, parent, any adult or even a peer. The teachers in the current study were found to be aware of the needs of LD students. The findings revealed that the strategies they were employing to teach LD students included: Behavioural and occupational therapy, counselling and individual attention, and motivation which are the recommended strategies and practices available in the existing literature.

Multiple themes emerged for the last question (*In what ways does learning disability affect the overall performance of a student in the development of English language skills? What are the recurring problems they have to face? How can they be dealt with?*) which clearly state that the problems faced by LD students vary in different contexts as well as from individual to individual. The most prominent theme was the difficulty of comprehension, where 4/10 teachers responded that students with LD face problems in comprehension of written text and reading material. Moreover, they struggle with spellings and recognition of letters. According to Respondent one, “The major problem I observed LD students face is spelling mistake and difficulty in word recognition, e.g. bed/bad”. Respondent two responded, “They face difficulty in comprehending the written and oral instruction. In my opinion, when they don’t understand what is being taught, they would not be able to perform. Furthermore, they will lack vocabulary, which hinders reading and writing too”. According to Respondent three, “At the primary stage, they face problem in reading and hesitate to speak”.

The second theme that was noticeable in the present findings was “developmental issue”. Some of the teachers (3/10) responded that LD students struggle with the development of language skills in the

context of ESL learning. Respondent four stated, “It affects the development of receptive and productive skills”. Respondent five reported, “They face difficulty in learning new skills related to any language. They face environmental and social problems”.

The rest of the respondents highlighted the confidence and retention issues. Respondent six stated, “First of all, it shakes their confidence that affects their overall performance. Mostly a child lacks the confidence to come to the front and face things. Sometimes they become unable to speak and pay attention”. The retention issue was also prominent in the responses. Respondent seven reported, “Low retaining power is another case of not being able to learn things properly. When a student cannot connect the current with the previous, they will not be able to understand and go through different levels of learning. They often appear demotivated”.

The remedies and solutions recommended by the teachers in this study included: Providing LD students with individual attention and special or extra classes, therapies and mutual cooperation of parents and teachers. These suggestions are consistent with those of Pierangelo and Giuliani (2010). According to the individualizing instruction practices suggested by them, LD students have different learning styles and retention, and for that reason, they require individual attention. Respondent 10 in the current study reported, “If mutual cooperation is there, it does wonder”. Prior literature also suggests that collaboration with parents is very important. It is important to educate them about the special needs their child may have ([Agrawal, 2007](#)).

The qualitative findings highlighted the fact that ESL students with LDs were at a high risk of English language achievement because of the effects of LD on the development of receptive and productive skills of the English language. According to Pierangelo and Giuliani (2010), “Academic deficits for children with learning disabilities normally fall into the areas of reading, mathematics, and written expressions” (p.16). Literacy skills were found to be greatly affected by LD, and reading difficulties were reported to be holding dominance. Along with reading, writing difficulties were scored second highest by the respondents in the current study. Pierangelo and Giuliani (2010) shared three main domains related to writing difficulties in which LD students’ performance suffers, that is, composition, spelling, and handwriting. The present study results are similar to the findings of Pierangelo and Giuliani (2010), which revealed that the students with dysgraphia or dyslexia lack the ability to form spellings accurately and present disorganized and messy work. Pierangelo and Giuliani (2010) report that “Studies have found that more than 60 percent of students with learning disabilities have some type of language disorder” (p. 29). Students with learning disabilities often have difficulties with the mechanical and social uses of language ([Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003](#)). Specific mechanical deficit difficulties are often present in the three different areas of syntax, semantics, and phonology. Language deficits are found in the areas of oral expression and listening comprehension. These two areas control our ability to communicate with others, and therefore a deficit in either or both can have a major impact on the quality of life of a child with an LD, as well as their education. In the present study, the findings showed moderate to mild effects of LD on oral skills (listening and speaking).

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this study was to explore the challenges faced by primary LD students in ESL learning in Pakistan. The four basic skills of the English language are interrelated, and impairment in one skill may affect the development of other skills as “the language system develops in overlapping and parallel way rather than in discrete sequential stages” ([Macarthur and Graham, 2016](#), p.171). The findings indicated a significant effect of LDs on ESL learning, and the awareness level and knowledge of the primary English language teachers regarding LDs was considerable, where 80.0% of the teachers were dealing with LD students and had sufficient knowledge about how to cater for the needs of students with LDs. The need for inclusive education was highlighted by 70.0% of the respondents. The outcomes further exposed that both receptive (listening & reading) and productive (speaking & writing) skills are affected by LDs. The challenges presented by LDs to students in developing reading skills and writing skills varied from moderate to high. On the other hand, it was found that LDs have moderate to mild effects on the development of listening skills and speaking skills of primary ESL students.

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