

*Research Article***English Language Education in North and East Syria “Rojava” Today: Challenges and Opportunities****Hividar Muhammed Muhammed^{1,*} , Karwan Mustafa Saeed² , Civin Ebdulrehman Segvan³ **¹ Department of English Language, Institution of Educational Science, University of Kobani, Kobani, Syria² Department of English Language, Faculty of Education, Koya University, Koya, 46017, Iraq³ Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Aleppo, Aleppo, Syria

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	The focus of this study is to investigate the challenges that English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Rojava face in learning English language and the opportunities to overcome the challenges. To this end, a qualitative inquiry was used to collect the data via a face-to-face interview with four experienced English language teachers and one language policy maker from the Ministry of Education. The study found that there are a series of factors that make learning English challenging including lack of English teachers, lack of motivation and family non-involvement in schooling, to name a few. Moreover, a number of formal and informal opportunities are being promoted to overcome these challenges. The opportunities were around preparing English language teaching staff, motivation and family support. Limitations and future research suggestions are discussed in the end of this article.
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1. Introduction

The beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 led to the Kurds' self-declared Autonomous Administration of Rojava (Espinosa & Ronan, 2023). Reforming the language of instruction is Rojava's ambition for "the democratization of education" as stated by Knapp et al. (2016) and Duman (2016). Hence, a reformation in the distribution of languages reflected a shift in power, where the Kurdish language (mother tongue) became the official language in Rojava instead of Arabic during the Ba'athist regime in Syria. This was done to reclaim local identities in North and East Syria. This policy towards people in Rojava was symbolically considered as a sign of flourishing the identity and existence of the Kurds and other minorities in the area (McGee, 2022). According to Miller (2022), the content of the education system in public schools is localized and emphasized on students' own language. Therefore, the strong promotion of native languages made students encounter numerous challenges in learning other languages including English language.

These challenges often make it difficult for students in Rojava to learn English language effectively, and as a result, many of them perform poorly in schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore challenges EFL learners face in Rojava and the attempts of language policy makers and teachers to improve English language proficiency level among students. A qualitative approach was selected to frame the research design and obtain participant's understanding on the challenges face EFL learners in Rojava and the opportunities to overcome these challenges.

The present study is significant in that it is the first study in Rojava attempting to identify the current linguistic situation in the area and the finding of this study aims at revealing the challenges that EFL learners face in learning the English language and suggesting some ways in which these challenges can be dealt with, so that EFL learners can efficiently learn the English language. For this purpose, the current article attempted to address the following research questions:

1. What challenges do EFL learners face in Rojava with regards to English language?
2. What are the formal and informal opportunities in improving English language in Rojava?

2. Literature Review

English language is an international language which is considered to be the world's lingua franca, as it is widely spoken and contributes to the development of the technology and international trade. Learning English has become very popular all over the world. There are several factors that enhance individuals and communities to learn the language. According to Richards (2015), the reasons for learning English language are: (1) English is a common language for the media; (2) people learn it for tourism; and (3) people need it for education or business.

Crystal (1997) in his book, *English as a Global Language*, stated that a language obtains a global status when its role is recognized in all countries. Crystal defines English as the native language when it serves as the official language such as, English in England or Australia. Moreover, he defines the global status of the English language through observing its usage as the language of trade, technology, science and sports (Crystal, 1997). Similarly, McKay (2002) stated that the growth of English in any country is significant for becoming part of the global community. Critically, Language by Spolsky (2004, 2012) is language practice, language beliefs, and language intervention. According to Spolsky (2004, 2012), linguistic ideology refers to the views and perceptions of the language variety of communities.

Long et al. (2013) investigated whether English language learners' proficiency level is affected by challenges such as, motivation in leaning a language. Data were collected from 45 respondents and the results showed that most students have a strong motivation to learn. Some of their motivations include:

obtaining good grads in the examination with the potential of securing a good job in the future. According to Long et al. (2013), some of the suggestions for teachers to increase motivation are firstly, establishing the right perception of learning English, which is improving one's own quality rather than learning for external factors such as passing examinations. The second step is evolving the interest in learning English because interest is the best teacher for learners.

Likewise, Noprival et al. (2021) explored polyglots' motivation for learning several languages. Researchers collected data using semi-structured interviews gained from five informants. The method they utilized was a descriptive case study. The findings showed that the learners' motivation for learning foreign languages were (a) pleasure, (b) social intercourse, (c) professional purposes, and (d) academic purposes.

Moreover, some scholars argue that family involvement in children's schooling is widely regarded as an important factor in their academic achievements. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) examined parents-involvement in schooling and showed that parents who participate in their children's education create a change in their children's improvement.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

Rojava consists of three different cantons. In this study, the focus is on the western one, Kobani, due to the difference in characteristics between these cantons. In other regions of Rojava, there is access to other languages due to private schools and various nationalities such as Arabs and Assyrian. However, in Kobani the majority are Kurds, thus, only Kurdish language is being taught in early stages of education. We employed a qualitative research design to collect data through face-to-face individual interviews, utilizing a semi-structured format. The rationale for selecting this method was to offer a deep understanding on the issue and gain richer information. As recommended by Nunan (2010), a qualitative approach is more appropriate for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the nature of a problem. Additionally, the visual cues are crucial in comprehending the depth of meaning as highlighted by Gillham (2005) and Fielding and Thomas (2008). This method structures the work but leaves open opportunities to ask more open-ended questions to follow the direction of the conversation and in-depth understanding (Bloomberg, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2. Participants

We conducted interviews in Kobani city with four selected English teachers and one language policy maker who teach or have taught English language as a foreign language at four different public schools in Kobani. Their teaching experience ranges from 5 to 15 years and their age is between 30 and 45 years old. They consist of both males and females. The participant selection was based on those who can speak English language in order to avoid translating the interviews into English language. However, only one interview was in Arabic, which was the one with a policy maker who preferred to talk in Arabic as it is his mother tongue. Therefore, his interview was translated into English language and back-retranslated into Arabic language again to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures and Analysis of Data

We collected the data after gaining the approval to conduct this research from the Research Department at the University of Kobani and the Ministry of Education. The participants were familiarized with the interview questions and the purpose of this study before recording the interviews and the ethical issues were explained to ensure the confidentiality of the interviews. During the interviews, we discussed the current situation of English language in Rojava, the challenges EFL learners face in learning English language and the desired solutions and opportunities to overcome the challenges.

To analyze the data, we adopted thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) by means of coding and emerging themes. Six steps were followed in analyzing the data. First, we got familiarized with the data through reviewing the transcriptions of the interviews. Second, we highlighted single concepts and similar challenges from the participants' statements in order to collect similar codes and organize the codes. Third, we identified patterns among the data and generated themes as highlighted by Creswell (2005). In the fourth step, we reviewed the themes to ensure their accuracy. In the fifth step, the themes were identified and organized into sequential sections as three different challenges EFL learners face. In the final step, we started writing up the analysis and reporting the results according to the most important factors in making learning English challenging.

4. Research Findings

Based on the results from our thematic analysis, EFL learners in Rojava face numerous challenges in learning English language and various opportunities are suggested to overcome the challenges. The write up is organized around three main themes identified as: lack of English teachers, lack of motivation and family non-involvement in schooling. Moreover, the research found some opportunities that were organized

under different themes as possible solutions to overcome the challenges including: preparing English teaching staff, motivation and family support.

4.1. Challenges face EFL learners

4.1.1. Lack of English teachers in Rojava

Based on the results of the present study, lack of English teachers is the most crucial challenge in teaching and learning English language in Rojava. The English proficiency level of the new coming students who study at the universities in Rojava is very low, the majority of them only have basic knowledge of English language, a very low level in grammar, vocabulary and communicative competence in the language. Our research findings revealed that almost all the participants pointed out that the lack of English teachers in primary and secondary schools is a key factor in challenging EFL learners in Rojava. Due to the Syrian conflict and the war in Rojava, a number of educated people left the country including English language teachers. As the language policy maker pointed out:

“It appears that there are many challenges that students face, especially in the field of language learning. These challenges come because of the difficult circumstances that the region has experienced, such as migrations and negative changes in the situation. The effects of these events reflected on mentalities led to long periods of interruption of educational support.”

Teacher 1 also mentioned that the reason for not having enough English teachers at schools is because of the migration of intellectuals and teachers as stated, “In Rojava, we have many challenges including lack of English teachers because most of them are abroad”. Therefore, this study indicates that lack of teachers is a big problem in the region according to teacher 2 in this study:

“First, I think that the main challenge that we face or students face today is the lack of academic staff. We do not have an academic staff that teaches English in a good way, in addition to that, we do not apply more than old ways in teaching.”

The proficiency level of English teachers in primary schools is low and does not meet the demands of English language teaching (ELT). Due to the lack of teachers at schools, some non-English specialized teachers teach English language at primary schools that leads students to face difficulties in learning the language due to wrong pronunciation and misunderstanding of some grammatical rules, as teacher 3 and 4 stated:

“There are no specialized English teachers who teach English subjects at primary schools. Maybe Kurdish teachers or Arabic teachers teach English language, even though it is not their field of study.”

4.1.2. Lack of motivation

From the results of the qualitative data analysis, it seemed that all the participants agreed that lack of motivation was a challenge faced EFL learners. Motivation is a crucial factor required for learning English and has effective influence on language learning. This study indicates that there is a relationship between students' motivation in learning a language and their language proficiency level. As highlighted by Harmer (2003), students who are motivated in learning English, demonstrated a higher language proficiency level. Therefore, this study found that lack of motivation was a challenge that prevented students from effective learning of English language as highlighted by Teacher 4:

“Lack of motivation actually is a very big problem that faces students. The problem is that there is no motivation for learning English language that makes the students learn or practice the language.”

One the other hand, the policy maker pointed out that, parents' lack of motivation in learning English language affects negatively their children's motivation in learning the language:

“Parents' lack of interest in languages is linked to their children's motivation and their educational future.”

4.1.3. Family non-involvement in schooling

The results of the study showed that family non- involvement in schooling is the third challenge face English language teaching and learning in Rojava. The school is students' second home, but the foundation is always in the first house. Parents play a very crucial role in enhancing students' academic achievement by helping them to approach threatening situations with confidence. Therefore, not supporting children and not instilling in them the love of education and learning languages by their parents are major challenges face EFL learners according to the policy maker as he stated:

“Lack of motivation and parents not encouraging a love of science and learning languages are also major challenges.”

Similarly, Teacher 1 stated that family non-involvement in their children's academic life is considered a big challenge facing them in learning English language:

“And there is another problem. It's a family non-involvement. Actually, it's a very important point; the parents should support their children to learn the language.”

Furthermore, the impact of poor economic conditions increases parents' neglect of their children's education. The policy maker related family non-involvement to the economic conditions of the family:

“It seems that poor economic conditions contribute to parents' neglect of developing their children's future. Parents non-encouraging of science and learning languages are also major challenges.”

4.2. Opportunities to Overcome Challenges

4.2.1. Preparing English teaching staff

Numerous opportunities are being raised to overcome the problem of not having many English teachers in schools. Our results revealed that efforts are noticeable in the university, where there are attempts to introduce professional development programs for teachers, which may mitigate the shortage of qualified teachers and improve teaching and increase the quality of English among future teachers for effective learning to occur. As Teacher 1 stated:

“Here we have many attempts in Rojava. In the university, students majoring English graduate. So, they will start teaching at schools. That will be helpful because I already said we have lack of teachers. I think this is important also for other challenges that I talked about like lack of confidence.”

In the university, teachers with professional qualifications are required to enrich the opportunities for developing the communication skills of the students. For example, necessary efforts have been employed to prepare an effective English teaching staff to be qualified to teach at schools according to Teacher 3:

“Our university is working on solving this problem. Our university is preparing a group of teachers, good teachers, who studies in a good way to teach in a good way at schools.”

The transfer of students to the English language major at the institute or university constitutes a strategic step. A focus on English teachers and the presence of private institutes in Rojava will indicate increased interest in English language, as it was stated by the policy maker:

“When the teaching staff is completed, the focus will be on enhancing the English language, and interest will be increased, with the presence of many private institutes in the city of Kobani.”

4.2.2. Motivation

Student motivation plays an important role in EFL classes. Focusing on students' motivation seems to remain as a driving force for effective language learning as the results revealed. The study showed that students' self-confidence should be raised in order to promote their motivation through some strategies in the classroom as Teacher 1 said:

“Motivation is so important to build self-confidence of the students and for them to overcome their fears of speaking English and to be able to speak in public and become well understood by others.”

Another suggestion is to highlight the purpose of learning English and its importance as a global language rather than learning English for the sake of passing examinations as Teacher 3 suggested:

“We have to have teachers who guide students, who modify the importance of English language for the students at the beginning.”

Teacher 2 made his point clear as well when he said, “Motivation needs academic staff. If we don't have an academic staff, we don't have motivation”.

4.2.3. Family support

All participants in this study agreed that family support plays a vital role in their children's academic success. As a solution, some teachers argued that parents should know English because their knowledge in the English language will make them monitor their children's progress in and out of schools. Moreover, parent's involvement in schooling motivates their children to learn and produce high levels in school performance according to Teacher 1:

“The role of family is so crucial in this process of learning especially when they try to support their children to be successful in producing a new language by encouraging them, supporting them regularly and communicating with the administration of schools to see what are the problems that their children are facing there, maybe they can help them by a way or another.”

The gap resulted from the challenges must be addressed and enough support from parents and teachers must be provided. To close this gap, it requires encouraging effective communication between the school and parents to support the students and enhance their love of learning as highlighted by the policy maker:

“Communication between school and parents plays a big role in motivating students. I believe that cognate languages facilitate the learning process, but can present challenges to foreign language acquisition.”

Similarly, Teacher 4 emphasized the important role of parents in their children’s academic life when he stated:

“They should go to their schools and ask teachers about their children and their levels of speaking language to know the problems that their children face.”

Therefore, the study plan for teaching languages should be gradual, starting from the mother tongue to the third language, which contributes to enhancing academic performance. To enhance this communication, school administration can guide parents to be familiarized with the importance of English as a global and international language. Thus, parents can encourage their children for learning the language. This can be done by providing adequate support and effective regular communication between the school and parents regarding the students' academic achievement and develop students' lifelong love of learning, which is a key to success. In addition, efforts are recommended to be directed towards closing gaps in English language teaching in schools and improving the quality of teachers.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this contribution was to explore the challenges EFL learners face in learning English language and the opportunities to overcome these challenges in the context of Rojava. The findings of the study revealed that the participants highlighted three most significant challenges that face English language teaching in Rojava including lack of English teachers, lack of motivation and family non-involvement in schooling. Despite these challenges, there are numerous formal and informal opportunities which are being promoted to overcome these challenges including, preparing English teaching staff, motivation and family support.

The findings of the study highlighted that introducing professional teachers could lessen the shortage of qualified instructors and improve teaching methodologies (Johnson, 2006). Moreover, the finding also echoes the previous study by Velasco and Fix (2000) who showed the inefficient educational practices by teachers. To overcome this challenge, improving the efficiency of teachers is required.

The present study’s results align with previous research by Giles (2016) emphasizing the critical role

of motivation in enhancing language learning outcomes. It reported that student's motivation for learning a language was just their hobby. It is worth mentioning that this finding is important because effective motivation for students is a key factor in a long-term success. Marten and Mostert (2012) found that motivation is a key factor for polyglots to learn several foreign languages. Similarly, Bateman and Oliveira (2014) found that motivation of Spanish-speaking students in learning Portuguese was a crucial matter in learning the language. Therefore, EFL teachers are recommended to consider improving student's motivation for learning a new language. This is similar to what Usó Juan (2006) found in his study about the impact of students' negative attitudes on their performance causing limited competence in English. The findings of this study also yielded that for effective English language learning, students need to be motivated to learn, otherwise, they will not get benefit from the instructors' efforts.

Parent's involvement in schooling plays a crucial role in children's academic and social success in schools. Parents are widely regarded to promote better grades and increase school enrolments (Epstein & Van Vorrihis, 2001). According to Calabres et al. (2004), parental involvement is an interactive process. Therefore, it is a great challenge for learning English language if the parents do not involve in their children's life and support and motivate them. This finding is important because it suggests that parents play a vital role in their children's school matters (Amir, 2009).

Contrary to the findings of the current study, Nazar (2012), exploring challenges Afghan immigrant youth face in the process of acquiring English language, argues that the students were motivated by their parents who strongly encourage their children to learn English in order to pursue higher education and subsequently are offered with better job opportunities.

To conclude, encouraging effective communication between the school and parents to motivate students and enhance their love of learning is crucially significant. Thus, children who have a chance of learning English are those whose parents afford sending them to private language classes. Over all, the findings of this study revealed that qualified English teachers, motivation and family support enhance successful and effective English language learners.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study have explored some of the concerns of English as a global language that affects the future of Rojava. The major findings of the current study presented the challenges faced EFL

learners in learning English language and the opportunities to overcome the challenges. The results showed that EFL learners face difficulties in learning English language due to the lack of English teachers in schools, the lack of motivation among learners and parent's non-involvement in schooling for supporting their children.

These challenges combine a lack of educational specializations and motivating parents to support language learning. Recently, Kurdish received the most focus, and it is the most usable language in Rojava. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate, lack of students' interest and information was among the most common challenges. It is preferable for educational institutions to reconsider the situation of English language because of its crucial role in determining the future status of our area and its international involvement. A sociocultural level affected the situation of English because of the identity issues that promoted Kurdish language and marginalized other languages. Ultimately, the major results of this contribution show that we must strive for equity in the use of the official language and encourage the learning of additional languages. In the information age, children can have the opportunity to learn three or four languages, enhancing their abilities and contributing to their future development.

7. Limitations and Future Research Considerations

Although the current study offers important findings pertaining to English language teaching in Rojava today, it suffers from some limitations. First, time constraints were the biggest problem in conducting this qualitative inquiry, especially during the data collection stage. Second, this study was a qualitative approach in nature which may not provide rich information and general insights and, therefore; a mixed-method approach may best suit this study to be conducted in the future. Further, it was also challenging to conduct interviews with EFL teachers due to their busy schedules. Only those who speak English language were chosen in order not to spend time on translating the interviews due to the lack of time. Moreover, there were no primary school English teachers who were confident enough that their English is proficient to talk because they are not specialized in English language. Therefore, only four EFL teachers from secondary schools and university were interviewed. Although the participants helped to answer the research questions raised in this small contribution, we suggest that future research considerations involve more participants to address the English language teaching in Rojava employing more advanced research approaches to offer more comprehensive results.

Declaration of Competing Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing of interest.

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