

Setting Pass Rate Targets for English Teachers of Rural Schools. Pressure Performance and Challenges in O/L Exam

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ABSTRACT

In Sri Lanka, schools are increasingly setting pass rate targets for teachers and students, with educational authorities establishing annual benchmarks to be achieved in national examinations. While intended to improve academic performance, this practice places considerable pressure on teachers, often impacting their teaching methods and overall well-being. This study investigates the performance pressures and challenges faced by English teachers in rural schools as a result of these target-setting practices. It aims to provide insights into how these teachers cope with the demands of meeting pass rate targets in the G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) examination. The study involved two samples of teachers. As the first sample, six randomly selected English teachers, each with over seven years of teaching experience, who participated in face-to-face interviews. Based on the insights gathered from these interviews, a structured questionnaire was developed. Subsequently, 27 English teachers from rural schools were selected as the second sample using a convenience sampling method and were provided with the questionnaire. It included background information, Likert scale items ranging from 0 to 5, and open-ended questions. A mixed-methods approach was employed for data analysis, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The findings of the study reveal that setting pass rate targets creates performance pressure and numerous challenges for English teachers. The results indicate that these targets influence teachers' instructional methods and often place sole responsibility on teachers, despite the fact that students are also integral participants in the teaching and learning process. This pressure leads to increased anxiety and negatively affects teachers' work-life balance. Additionally, the socio-economic backgrounds of students in rural areas hinder the achievement of these set targets. The research highlights that setting unrealistic targets for rural schools is problematic, as achieving them cannot rest solely on the shoulders of teachers. Instead, it requires the collaborative effort of the education department, school administration, students, parents, and other stakeholders. Based on these findings, the study recommends that targets be set realistically and in a way that supports the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: challenges, English teachers, pass rate targets, pressure performance, rural schools

INTRODUCTION

Raising student performance on national exams is a primary goal in many educational institutions, particularly in developing nations. Implementing pass rate targets, which are precise performance goals for teachers based on the proportion of pupils anticipated to pass standardized tests, is one popular tactic. These goals are frequently employed as standards to gauge the efficacy of teachers and promote advancements in academic results. Such goals are commonly linked to performance on the G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) exams in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in rural schools in Sri Lanka.

Setting pass rate goals can inspire teachers to improve their teaching and promote accountability, but it can also put a lot of pressure on them, particularly in rural areas with limited resources where issues like low student proficiency, big class sizes, and a lack of teaching resources are common. In these environments, English teachers frequently have to balance the demands of the institution with challenging working conditions that could impede students' advancement. This study looks at the demands and difficulties English instructors

in rural schools encounter when preparing their pupils for the O/L English test, as well as how pass rate targets affect their performance. Developing equitable and successful educational policies that promote teacher well-being and student achievement requires an understanding of these relationships.

Research Questions

1. How do pass rate targets influence the teaching practices and performance of English teachers in rural schools?
2. At what extent setting pass rate targets creates pressure for English teachers of rural schools?
3. What are the challenges encountered by the English teachers of rural schools?

Research Objectives

This study explores the impact of setting pass rate targets for English teachers of rural schools. In addition it also identifies the pressure performance and specific challenges encountered by the English teachers of rural schools in meeting pass rate targets.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been much discussion in the educational literature on the role that target setting plays in the role of teachers accountability. Performance targets in English language instruction, particularly in rural schools, frequently seek to enhance student performance on standardized tests like the GCE Ordinary Level (O/L) exam. Although target-driven education can foster focused instruction and accountability (Linn, 2000), it may also put teachers under unanticipated pressure, especially in rural and under resourced areas.

Despite being meant to enhance quality, target setting can lead to "teaching to the test," which reduces the emphasis on communicative competence and more general language abilities (Shohamy, 2001). This affects both the overall development of pupils' language skills and pedagogical independence. On the other hand, target setting can assist in identifying gaps and providing guidance for professional development programs when it is properly structured and contextualized (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

There isn't much research on how English teachers in rural Sri Lankan schools respond to performance goals associated with the O/L test. By examining the demands they encounter, how they affect their teaching methods, and the wider implications for educational fairness and language-learning outcomes, this study seeks to close that gap.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs two phases. First, face to face interviews were conducted for six English teachers who have the experience of teaching more than 7 years in all were chosen at random from rural schools to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These teachers were chosen to reflect a variety of backgrounds and experiences in the classroom. Responses were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. A systematic questionnaire was created based on the information obtained from the interviews. Convenient sampling was then used to disseminate the questionnaire to 27 English teachers. These participants had prior experience in teaching English for the O/L test and were also from rural educational environments. The questionnaire consists of both Likert scale items and open ended questions with background information to gather qualitative data. The questionnaire was distributed digitally. To find key problems and recurrent themes pertaining to performance pressures and teaching difficulties, qualitative data from interviews was subjected to thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the quantitative data from the questionnaire in order to find recurring themes, frequencies, and trends in the teachers' responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender

Table 1: Gender

Male	Female
9	18

Table 1 displays the gender distribution of English teachers in rural schools based on a sample size of 27. The data reveals a significant gender disparity, with female teachers (18) outnumbering male teachers (9). This means that 66.7% of the sample are female, while 33.3% are male.

Years of teaching experience

Table 2: Years of teaching experience

Years of experience	No of teachers
10 – 12	2
12-15	6
15-18	15
Above 18	4

Table 2 presents the distribution of English teachers in rural schools based on their years of teaching experience. Out of the total 27 teachers, the majority—15 teachers—have between 15 to 18 years of experience, indicating a highly experienced teaching workforce. 6 teachers fall within the 12 to 15 years range, while 4 teachers have more than 18 years of experience. Only 2 teachers have relatively less experience, falling within the 10 to 12 years range.

Pass rate targets achieved last year

Table 3: Pass rate targets

Pass rate targets	No of teachers
60 - 65	17
65 – 70	6
70 – 75	4

Table 3 illustrates the pass rate targets achieved by English teachers in rural schools during the previous year. Out of 27 teachers, the majority ,17 teachers achieved pass rates between 60% and 65%. 6 teachers reached pass rates between 65% and 70%, while only 4 teachers achieved between 70% and 75%. This distribution suggests that while most teachers met the minimum pass rate benchmarks, relatively few exceeded them, indicating potential challenges in raising student performance beyond basic targets in rural educational settings.

Pressure performance and wellbeing

Table 4: Pressure performance and wellbeing

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a. The pressure to achieve pass rate targets significantly increases teachers' workload	0%	1.97%	14.7%	83.33%	0%

b. Pass rate target policies contribute to diminished job satisfaction among teaching staff	0%	0%	24.5%	49.8%	25.7%
c. Support materials and mentoring are provided to us to help us achieve the targets	6%	13.3%	36.7%	33.3%	10.7%
d. School and educational administrators hold teachers only responsible when goals aren't met	0%	26.7%	0%	56.7%	16.6%
e. The process of setting targets stresses teachers and causes them anxiety	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%
f. Setting targets disrupts the work-life balance of teachers	3.5%	12%	0%	77.1%	7.4%

Table 4 presents the responses of English teachers in rural schools regarding the impact of pass rate targets on their performance pressure and wellbeing. The majority of teachers (83.33%) agreed that the pressure to achieve pass rate targets significantly increases their workload, while 100% agreed that the process of setting targets causes stress and anxiety. Additionally, 49.8% agreed and 25.7% strongly agreed that these policies reduce job satisfaction. A notable 77.1% of teachers also felt that target-setting disrupts their work-life balance. While 56.7% agreed that teachers are solely held accountable when targets are not met, only a minority (33.3% agree, 10.7% strongly agree) felt they received adequate support and mentoring. These responses suggest that pass rate targets are a major source of pressure and stress among rural English teachers, negatively affecting their professional satisfaction and personal wellbeing.

Teaching experience and challenges

Table 5: Teaching experience and challenges

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a. The need to meet targets influences my teaching methods	0%	8.4%	11.3%	47%	33.3%
b. Each year's increase in the number of targets enhances the efficiency of the teaching-learning practice	0%	25%	0%	75%	0%
c. Students' attitudes and their behaviors influence their ability to reach their targets	0%	0%	10.6%	72.7%	16.7%
d. Family background and students' economic Background influences their goal achievement	0%	8.9%	23%	51.4%	16.7%
e. Teachers work hard and put in extra effort to achieve the set target	0%	7.7%	0%	44%	48.3%
f. Students collaborate and contribute alongside teachers to achieve the goal	0%	6%	57%	21%	16%

Table 5 explores how teaching experience relates to the challenges teachers face in meeting pass rate targets. A significant portion of teachers (47% agree, 33.3% strongly agree) reported that the need to meet targets influences their teaching methods. Interestingly, while 75% agreed that the annual increase in targets enhances the efficiency of teaching and learning, 25% disagreed, suggesting mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of this approach. Most teachers (72.7% agree, 16.7% strongly agree) acknowledged that student attitudes and

behavior directly affect their ability to meet targets. Additionally, 68.1% (51.4% agree, 16.7% strongly agree) believed that students' family and economic backgrounds play a role in achieving academic goals. A large majority (44% agree, 48.3% strongly agree) also admitted to putting in extra effort to meet set targets. However, only a small proportion (21% agree, 16% strongly agree) felt that students collaborate and contribute meaningfully toward reaching those goals, with 57% remaining neutral. These findings suggest that while teachers are committed and adaptive under pressure, external factors—such as student engagement and socio-economic challenges—pose significant obstacles.

The analysis produced five themes.

Affect their teaching

Although performance targets are meant to improve academic performance, they can place a great deal of strain on educators who are already dealing with a lack of funding, poor infrastructure, and socioeconomic disadvantages among their pupils. These factors create an atmosphere in the classroom where teachers feel pressured to concentrate only on test results, often at the expense of more general learning objectives like creativity, language development, and student involvement.

Teachers' teaching strategies are greatly impacted by the pass rate targets they set. Many educators adopt an “exam-oriented approach”, stressing structured replies and model solutions that closely resemble examination forms, in response to the pressure of meeting these standards. More innovative and student-centered teaching strategies are frequently sacrificed in favor of this limited emphasis on test preparation. Teachers said they feel pressured to focus on exam drills rather than developing students' overall language proficiency or involving them with a variety of interactive teaching strategies and resources. Their capacity to try out novel approaches, modify lessons to accommodate various learning preferences, or provide regionally relevant content is thereby severely constrained. In addition to lessening the depth of the educational process, this also inhibits teachers' professional creativity and independence in the classroom.

Challenges

The strong emphasis on achieving measurable goals caused teachers to feel limited in their pedagogical choices. Many talked about changing lesson plans to “teach to the test” instead of fostering comprehensive language proficiency. Teachers' feeling of autonomy and professional inventiveness are restricted in this performance-driven environment, which also has an impact on the quality of instruction. The management of classrooms with a wide range of competence levels is particularly difficult for English teachers in rural areas, since pass rate goals don't always account for the students' complex and varied learning demands. In an effort to improve teaching and learning effectiveness, the number of pass rate targets is raised annually. In actuality, though, this desired improvement is not being achieved. Several outside variables continue to impede growth even when teachers make extra efforts, such as adding more classes, customizing lesson plans, and delivering individualized help. The attitudes and actions of students toward learning English present a significant obstacle. Numerous kids exhibit low motivation, sporadic attendance, and little involvement in extracurricular activities. They stated, “students are not working together collaboratively with teachers”. Students' family background and socioeconomic conditions, which have a significant impact on their academic achievement, further exacerbate this gap. The necessity for children to contribute to household income, a lack of parental support, and little exposure to English outside of the classroom all create a learning environment where reaching ever-higher goals becomes unachievable. Teachers are thereby disproportionately burdened and held responsible for results that are influenced by factors that are mostly out of their control.

Pressure and well being

Among the participants, mental health and wellness were identified as major concerns. Due to the pressure to reach goals, many educators reported experiencing stress, anxiety, and burnout. The anxiety of performing poorly frequently resulted in emotions of inadequacy on a personal and professional level. The sensation of surveillance was heightened by the ongoing observation and assessment, which some educators found discouraging. These mental health problems are made worse for teachers in rural locations, who frequently

work alone in their careers without enough institutional or peer support. This can worsen their general wellbeing and, in certain situations, make them think about quitting teaching entirely. Teachers mentioned that they have “a heavy workload and experience high levels of stress” since they are expected to meet pass rate standards primarily on their own. Teachers must deal with these responsibilities alone since they have little to no access to professional development, mentoring, or support resources. The strain is increased by this lack of systematic assistance, particularly in rural schools with limited funding. Additionally, when goals are not reached, school and educational authorities sometimes blame teachers for everything without taking into account the larger contextual difficulties they encounter. A culture of blame rather than support is fostered by this one-sided accountability. Teachers experience anxiety and anticipatory tension just by establishing these goals, frequently without their input, because they worry about the repercussions of not meeting them. This pressure has the potential to lower job satisfaction, undermine morale, and have a detrimental effect on student outcomes and teacher performance over time.

Workload and job satisfaction

Another recurrent subject is workload. Setting pass rate goals frequently calls for more time spent on lesson planning, helping challenging students, and filing paperwork. Teachers who may already be handling several functions in underfunded schools are further burdened by these additional duties, which are not often accompanied by greater support or pay. Teachers who experience an imbalance between effort and reward feel overworked and underappreciated, which has a substantial impact on their job satisfaction. Many participants questioned if their careers could continue under such circumstances and noted a deterioration in their inner desire. Teachers often conduct extra classes on weekends and holidays in an effort to help students meet performance targets. However, this additional commitment leaves them with little to no time for their own families or personal well-being. The blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life contributes to emotional exhaustion and work-life imbalance. Many teachers express a sense of sacrifice, as they forgo rest and personal time to fulfill professional demands, often without adequate recognition or compensation, mentioned “work – life imbalance”. This ongoing strain not only affects their mental health but also diminishes their overall job satisfaction and long-term motivation.

School administration when targets are not met

When pass rate goals are not reached, tensions with the school administration are more noticeable. Despite contextual variables beyond their control, like absenteeism, a lack of study resources, or unfavorable study conditions at home, a number of teachers reported feeling scrutinized or criticized. Teachers and school leadership felt alienated and mistrusted in certain cases because administrative responses to unmet targets were punitive rather than supportive. The possibility of productive problem-solving and ongoing development is compromised by this breakdown in cooperation and communication. “School administrators often place the blame on teachers when pass rate targets are not achieved”, without fully considering the underlying issues related to students. Factors such as irregular attendance, lack of motivation, and socio-economic challenges are frequently overlooked. Instead of addressing these root causes, administrators continue to raise the targets each year, regardless of whether the previous ones were met. This persistent escalation of expectations, without corresponding support or contextual understanding, creates a cycle of unrealistic demands and growing pressure on teachers.

Overall, the analysis emphasizes that strict pass rate targets might have unforeseen negative effects, even if accountability in education is crucial. Systemic issues and performance expectations combine to create an environment that frequently impedes rather than improves educational outcomes for English teachers in rural areas. Performance evaluation requires a more sophisticated and encouraging approach that takes into account the particular difficulties of teaching in rural areas and places equal emphasis on teacher well-being and student progress.

CONCLUSION

There are many obstacles and a lot of pressure on English teachers in rural schools to reach O/L test pass rate targets. Unrealistic expectations imposed by educational authorities, lack of resources, and the socioeconomic

difficulties experienced by students in rural areas are frequently the causes of these pressures. Despite incorporation of students, poor training opportunities, and restricted access to instructional resources, teachers are expected to perform well. As a result, the pressure to meet goals has an effect on both their professional health and the teaching and learning process as a whole. In order to overcome these obstacles, target-setting must become more context-sensitive and helpful, emphasizing teacher empowerment over making them exclusively responsible for structural flaws.

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