
Teaching Basic English to Illiterate Adult Learners in a UK Migration-Driven Context: Evidence from Mirpur, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan

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Abstract

English plays a significant role in education, administration, employment, and international migration. In Pakistan, particularly in Mirpur Division, the historical trend of migration to the United Kingdom has increased the importance of English language proficiency. The introduction of spouse and partner visa requirements by the UK Border Agency made basic English certification compulsory, creating major challenges for adult learners with little or no formal education. Many learners encounter English for the first time in adulthood under urgent migration-related circumstances, resulting in fear, anxiety, and low confidence toward language learning. This study aimed to design, implement, and evaluate a Basic English Language syllabus specifically tailored for illiterate and minimally educated adult learners in Mirpur. A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted involving 50 adult learners aged 25–35 years enrolled in different language institutes. Approximately 80% of the participants were illiterate. Data were collected through a 20-item questionnaire containing open- and closed-ended questions, informal interviews with institute owners, classroom observations, and pre- and post-intervention assessments. The researcher developed and implemented a short-term syllabus emphasizing foundational listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills aligned with approved English language test requirements. Pre-test findings demonstrated weak performance in all four language skills, particularly among illiterate learners. Participants reported significant social, psychological, and financial pressure associated with compulsory English certification. Following the intervention, considerable improvement was observed, especially in listening and speaking abilities. Post-test results revealed a substantial increase in pass rates, with nearly all learners qualifying and several illiterate participants achieving first-class performance. Learners also displayed increased confidence and reduced fear toward English learning. The study concludes that structured, skill-focused English courses can effectively support migration-oriented adult learners and improve their language competence and test readiness.

Keywords: Adult ESL learners; Illiteracy; UK migration; English language policy; Basic English syllabus; Mirpur AJK

Introduction

English has emerged as a global language and functions as a primary medium of international communication in education, business, technology, and migration. As a lingua franca, English enables interaction among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and plays a central role in the

interconnected and interdependent world of the twenty-first century (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). Proficiency in English is widely regarded as an essential skill for academic success, professional mobility, and global participation. Consequently, the demand for English language learning has increased significantly across both developed and developing contexts.

In postcolonial societies such as Pakistan, English continues to occupy a dominant position despite the presence of multiple indigenous and national languages. It functions as the language of higher education, administration, law, media, and international engagement (Rahman, 1999; Shamim, 2011). Although English is formally taught within the education system, access to effective English language learning remains uneven. This disparity is particularly evident among adult learners who possess limited formal education or are completely illiterate. For such learners, acquiring even basic English proficiency is a complex process, as conventional English language teaching methods are largely designed for literate learners with prior schooling experience.

The significance of English language proficiency has intensified further due to its growing role in international migration policies. In 2010, the United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) introduced a mandatory English language requirement at the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) Level A1 for applicants seeking entry clearance as a spouse or civil partner of a person settled in the United Kingdom. Applicants are required to demonstrate basic speaking and listening competence by passing an approved English language test prior to migration. While the policy was introduced with the stated aim of supporting integration, scholars argue that such requirements also function as mechanisms of immigration control, linking language proficiency with citizenship, national identity, and border regulation (Cooke & Simpson, 2008).

Research on language and migration highlights the increasing centrality of English proficiency in shaping transnational family life. Capstick (2011) situates English language learning within the socio-historical context of Mirpur, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), a region profoundly shaped by migration to the United Kingdom since the early 1960s. Migration from Mirpur initially involved male labour migration, followed by family reunification and, more recently, marriage migration, which remains one of the primary legal routes for entry into the UK (Harris & Shaw, 2008; Shaw, 2000).

Mirpur occupies a distinctive position within migration scholarship due to its disproportionate representation within the British Pakistani Diaspora (Kalra, 2008). While remittances from migrants have contributed significantly to the local economy, educational development particularly access to quality English language education has not progressed at the same pace. Studies on education in AJK highlight systemic challenges, including inadequate instructional resources and limited teacher training, which restrict effective English language learning opportunities, especially for adults with little or no formal schooling (Coleman, 2010).

Within this migration-driven context, adult learners often encounter English for the first time under conditions of urgency and compulsion. Their motivation to learn English is primarily instrumental, linked directly to visa approval rather than long-term educational or professional goals. This raises critical questions regarding the suitability and fairness of standardized English language testing regimes for low-literate adult learners. Although UKBA-approved tests focus primarily on speaking and listening skills, such competencies are rarely emphasized or formally assessed within the state education system in Pakistan.

Scholars have raised concerns regarding the validity and equity of pre-entry language testing for migrants. Saville (2009) argues that language tests must be grounded in clear purpose, fairness, and validation to avoid discriminatory outcomes. However, empirical evidence supporting the appropriateness of UKBA-approved English language tests for illiterate or semi-literate adult migrants remains limited (Alderson, 2010). From a legal and human rights perspective, Singh and McColgan (2010) contend that compulsory pre-entry language requirements risk infringing upon the right to family life, particularly for applicants who face structural barriers to language learning due to poverty, limited education, or gender-based constraints.

Similarly, Smith (2013) documents how visa documentation and interview processes further compound the difficulties faced by applicants from non-literate backgrounds.

Despite the growing body of literature on language policy, migration, and testing, relatively little attention has been given to pedagogical responses that address the specific learning needs of illiterate adult learners in pre-migration contexts. Existing studies frequently identify the problem but rarely propose context-sensitive, classroom-based solutions. English language teaching materials and syllabi are typically designed for literate learners and do not adequately accommodate adults who lack basic literacy skills and require alternative instructional approaches.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for the development of localized, foundational English language teaching materials tailored to the linguistic, social, and educational realities of illiterate adult learners. The present study addresses this need by focusing on the development and implementation of a Basic English Language syllabus designed specifically for illiterate adult learners in Mirpur, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. By examining learner challenges, instructional practices, and post-intervention outcomes, the study seeks to contribute empirically grounded insights to the fields of English language teaching, migration studies, and adult education.

Methodology

Study Design

This study is an attempt to address the issue of limited English language knowledge among adults living in Mirpur city. This study was conducted in an English language class, where adult learners were closely observed during classroom teaching to identify their learning problems. Keeping these problems in view, this study aimed to help adult learners by suggesting the teaching of the basics of English language to make them familiar with the language. When adult learners understand the basics of English language, they are expected to show better results in the English language test required for entry clearance to the United Kingdom.

For this purpose, a syllabus based on basic knowledge of English language was implemented in an English language class. The language institution where the syllabus was applied was selected to examine the effectiveness of teaching English through basic-level instruction. The basics of English language were taught according to the designed syllabus to adult learners who joined the institution for learning English. As the lessons progressed, the adult learners showed improvement in all four skills of English language.

The study was conducted in a private English language institute affiliated with UKBA-approved test preparation. Adult learners faced difficulties in learning English language, which were closely observed during classroom teaching. Most learners were illiterate and considered English a very difficult language to learn. Some adult learners had attended school up to primary level, some up to middle level, a few were matriculate or intermediate, while a large number of adult learners were completely illiterate.

The total population at the selected English language institutions and approved test centers was 100 learners (Table 1). A sample of 50 adult learners aged between 25 and 35 years was selected for the study. Among these learners, 26 (52%) were female, and 24 (48%) were male.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants across Selected English Language Institutes

	AK English Language College	Kanwal Consultant	Shah-e-Hamdan Institute of English Language	Information Technology House
Population	35	13	30	22
Sample	15	10	15	10

Apart from illiterate learners, those who had attended school or college were also weak in English language. Most learners lacked basic knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills,

particularly speaking and listening (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Adult Learners by Educational Qualification

Qualification	Number of Adult Learners	Percentage
Higher Secondary Education/ Intermediate F.A/F.Sc.	15	60%
Secondary Education/Matriculation	6	24%
Illiterate (Including Middle and Primary)	4	16%

The people of Mirpur city have strong social, family, and economic ties with the United Kingdom due to long-standing migration trends. There is a custom of inter-family marriages between people settled in Mirpur city and those settled in the UK. After marriage, the individual from Mirpur city migrates to the UK to join his or her spouse. For this purpose, a settlement visa is required, and an English language certificate is compulsory for entry clearance, as required by the United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA).

The English language test initially comprised all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking); however, since October 2012, the test has consisted of listening and speaking skills only. To meet this requirement, various English language institutions and approved test centers have been established in Mirpur city. Although trained instructors are working in these institutions, illiteracy remains a major hurdle in learning English quickly. Most learners are adults and come to classes with mental pressure due to immigration-related concerns.

To investigate these issues, this study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Data were collected through a questionnaire designed specifically for adult English language learners and owners of English language institutions. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, including 10 open-ended and 10 closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions focused on participants' qualifications, reasons for leaving education, first and second languages, the importance and status of English language, the impact of UKBA rules, and suggestions for improving English teaching. The closed-ended questions were based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree and examined perceptions related to English language learning, compulsory English requirements, availability of institutions, and the usefulness of short courses.

Questionnaires were distributed with the consent of institution owners. Since many participants were illiterate or less educated, assistance was provided where required. Helpers recorded responses after questions were explained orally to the learners.

In addition to questionnaires, informal discussions were conducted with owners of English language institutions and approved test centers to understand the problems faced by adult learners. The owners highlighted the difficulty of teaching English to adult learners with limited education and agreed that short English language courses before taking the UKBA-approved test are necessary.

The study also included classroom observation and pre-test and post-test assessments. A specially designed Basic English Language syllabus was implemented over a period of approximately three and a half months. The syllabus focused on alphabet recognition, vocabulary development, basic grammar, sentence formation, and listening and speaking skills, using activity-based methods adapted for adult learners.

Results

Data Collection on Adults' Opinions Regarding English

The findings revealed that prior to the implementation of the designed syllabus, most adult learners performed poorly in all four language skills. Pre-test results showed a high failure rate, particularly among illiterate learners, who were unable to attempt listening, speaking, and writing components effectively.

From the questionnaire responses, it was observed that 20% of adult learners had varying levels of education, whereas 80% were illiterate. The reasons for leaving education included:

1. Non-educational family environment leading to disinterest in studies.
2. Domestic issues such as household responsibilities, illness of a parent, lack of financial resources, and unavailability of educational facilities.
3. Early marriage, particularly among females.

The first language of all respondents was Pahari. They learned Urdu as a second language and English as a third language. All respondents were affected socially, financially, and mentally by the compulsory English language certificate for UKBA entry clearance. Socially, they faced delays in joining spouses in the UK; financially, they had to pay for classes and tests; mentally, they struggled to learn English in adulthood while managing immigration-related pressures.

Responses indicated that adult learners now recognized the significance of English. They realized that proficiency in English confers social status and is essential for international communication, particularly in interactions with British nationals visiting Mirpur.

Adult learners suggested that English should be taught from the beginning in schools. They also recommended that institutions be established for adult learners and that qualified instructors teach English effectively.

English Language Assessment of Adults before Application of Designed Syllabus

Pre-test results confirmed that learners had very low proficiency. Among 25 learners, only 2 passed; the rest failed due to poor listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of Adult English Language Learners before the Application of Designed Syllabus.

Number of participants	Result (before the application of designed syllabus) (Pre-test)				OVERALL
	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	
1	P	P	P	P	PASS
2	F	P	F	F	FAIL
3	F	F	F	F	FAIL
4	F	F	F	F	FAIL
5	F	P	F	F	FAIL
6	F	F	P	F	FAIL
7	F	F	F	F	FAIL
8	F	F	F	F	FAIL
9	F	F	F	F	FAIL
10	F	F	F	F	FAIL
11	F	P	F	F	FAIL
12	F	F	F	P	FAIL
13	F	F	F	F	FAIL
14	F	F	F	F	FAIL
15	P	P	P	P	PASS
16	F	P	F	F	FAIL

17	F	F	F	F	FAIL
18	F	F	F	F	FAIL
19	F	F	F	F	FAIL
20	F	F	F	F	FAIL
21	F	P	F	F	FAIL
22	F	F	F	F	FAIL
23	F	P	F	F	FAIL
24	F	F	F	F	FAIL
25	F	P	F	F	FAIL

In the closed-ended questions, the majority of respondents shared similar opinions regarding English language learning:

1. For the statement “*English language learning is within your immediate grasp*”, 90% of respondents disagreed, and only 10% agreed.
2. All respondents (100%) strongly agreed that the new UKBA rule was inconvenient for them.
3. In response to “*Any changes in this rule will be of help to you*”, 100% strongly agreed.
4. 100% strongly agreed that English learning should be made easier.
5. Regarding the need for more English teaching institutes, 80% strongly agreed, while 20% were neutral.
6. 100% strongly agreed that their living environment was a barrier to English learning.
7. Concerning whether English taught in schools helps learning, 70% were neutral (mostly illiterate learners) and 30% disagreed.
8. 100% strongly agreed that UKBA’s compulsory English requirement affects the social and economic life of Mirpuri people.
9. 90% strongly agreed that English is difficult to learn, 6% agreed, and 4% were neutral.
10. 98% strongly agreed that learning English through short courses before the Approved test is necessary, and 2% were neutral (Table 4).

Table 4. Responses to Close Ended Questionnaire Items

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. English language learning is within your immediate grasp.		10%		90%	
2. The new rule of UKBA is of being inconvenience to you.	100%				
3. Any changes in thus rule will be of help to you.	100%				
4. English learning should be made easier to learn.	100%				
5. There is need to establish more English teaching institutes.	80%		20%		
6. The environment in which you live is a problem in the way of English learning.	100%				
7. English that is being taught in schools as a subject is helpful in learning English			70%	30%	

language.					
8. UKBA new immigration rules imposing English language compulsory would affect the social and economic life of Mirpuri people.	100%				
9. English is difficult language to learn.	90%	6%	4%		
10. Learning English language through short courses before taking the Approved test is necessary.	98%		2%		

Questionnaire Findings

- 80% of learners were illiterate
- 100% reported negative social, financial, and psychological impacts due to the UKBA requirement
- 98% strongly agreed that short preparatory courses were necessary

English Language Assessment After Application of Designed Syllabus

The pre-test demonstrated that learners had very limited knowledge of English. Most participants failed in reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks. Illiterate learners were particularly disadvantaged, struggling to attempt any tasks correctly.

The questionnaire analysis further supported these results, showing that 80% of learners were illiterate and 100% reported being negatively affected socially, financially, and psychologically by the UKBA English language requirement. In addition, 98% strongly agreed that short preparatory English courses were necessary before attempting the approved test (Table 5).

Table 5. Post-test Results of Adult English Language Learners after the Application of Designed Syllabus

Participants	Result (after the application of designed syllabus) (Post-test)		OVERALL
	Total Marks	Obtained Marks	
1	75	57	Pass
2	75	57	Pass
3	75	63	First class pass
4	75	61	First class pass
5	75	40	Pass
6	75	69	First class pass
7	75	56	Pass
8	75	40	Pass
9	75	59	Pass
10	75	48	Pass
12	75	57	Pass
13	75	63	First class pass
14	75	58	Pass
15	75	52	Pass
16	75	61	First class pass
17	75	53	Pass

18	75	58	Pass
19	75	60	First class pass
20	75	40	Pass
21	75	45	Pass
22	75	60	First class pass
23	75	55	Pass
23	75	47	Pass
24	75	38	Pass
25	75	58	Pass

English Language Assessment after Application of Designed Syllabus

After the implementation of the designed syllabus, all learners showed measurable improvement. The post-test results indicated that the majority passed all language skills, with several illiterate learners achieving first-class pass results. Learners exhibited increased confidence, greater participation in class activities, and reduced anxiety toward learning English.

Comparing pre-test and post-test performance revealed a marked improvement, particularly among learners with little to no formal education. The intervention demonstrated that structured basic-level instruction effectively enhanced English language proficiency and learner confidence (Table 6).

Table 6. Comparison of Learners' Performance before and after the Application of Designed Syllabus

Participants	Performance	
	Previous	New
1	Pass	Pass
2	Fail	Pass
3	Fail	First class pass
4	Fail	First class pass
5	Fail	Pass
6	Fail	First class pass
7	Fail	Pass
8	Fail	Pass
9	Fail	Pass
10	Fail	Pass
11	Fail	Pass
12	Fail	First class pass
13	Fail	Pass
14	Fail	Pass
15	Pass	First class pass
16	Fail	Pass
17	Fail	Pass
18	Fail	First class pass
19	Fail	Pass

20	Fail	Pass
21	Fail	First class pass
22	Fail	Pass
23	Fail	Pass
24	Fail	Pass
25	Fail	Pass

Final Mock Test

At the completion of the syllabus, the study decided to take a sample test of the Approved English language test by UKBA from the adult learners to check their proficiency. Though the study conducted its own test, it also aimed to compare the learners' performance against a sample of the UKBA-approved test. The illiterate adult learners were very confident and excited to take the test, as they now had basic knowledge of English and were no longer afraid of the language (Table 7).

Table 7. Final Sample Test Results Modeled on UKBA-approved Test

Participant	Final Result (Sample test, modeled on a UKBA-approved test)				OVERALL
	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	
1	P	P	P	P	First class pass
2	P	P	P	P	First class pass
3	P	P	P	P	Pass
4	P	P	P	P	Pass
5	P	P	P	P	First class pass
6	P	P	P	P	Pass
7	P	P	P	P	Pass
8	P	P	P	P	Pass
9	P	P	P	P	First class pass
10	F	P	P	P	Pass
11	P	P	P	P	First class pass
12	P	P	P	P	First class pass
13	F	P	P	P	Pass
14	F	P	P	P	Pass
15	P	P	P	P	First class pass
16	F	P	P	P	Pass
17	P	P	P	P	First class pass
18	P	P	P	P	First class pass
19	P	P	P	P	Pass
20	P	P	P	P	First class pass
21	P	P	P	P	First class pass
22	P	P	P	P	First class pass
23	F	P	P	P	First class pass

24	F	F	F	F	Fass
25	P	P	P	P	Pass

Performance Analysis

The performance of adult English language learners was compared before and after the application of the designed Basic English Language syllabus. Before the application of the syllabus, the learners had very limited knowledge of English language and attempted the test mostly by guessing the answers, which resulted in incorrect responses. The learners were particularly weak in listening and speaking skills and were unable to attempt these components properly. In the reading test, most learners could not understand the text, while in the writing test only a few learners attempted to write, but their writing lacked basic structure and correctness. Overall, the majority of learners failed the pre-test due to lack of familiarity with the English language.

After the implementation of the Basic English Language syllabus, the learners became familiar with the basic rules of English language, including alphabet recognition, vocabulary, sentence formation, and basic grammar. This familiarity enabled them to understand instructions, attempt questions confidently, and perform better in all four language skills. The improvement was particularly noticeable among illiterate adult learners, who initially showed fear and hesitation toward English language learning. After completing the course, these learners demonstrated increased confidence and active participation in classroom activities. Among the 25 adult learners, seven learners showed excellent improvement and achieved first-class pass results according to the marking criteria of the UKBA-approved test. The remaining learners also showed satisfactory improvement and successfully passed the test. Learners with some prior education (matric and intermediate) also showed improvement and reported that English had never been taught to them in such a structured and basic manner before. Overall, the findings indicate that teaching English through a syllabus focused on basic language skills significantly improves performance and reduces anxiety among adult learners (Figure 1).

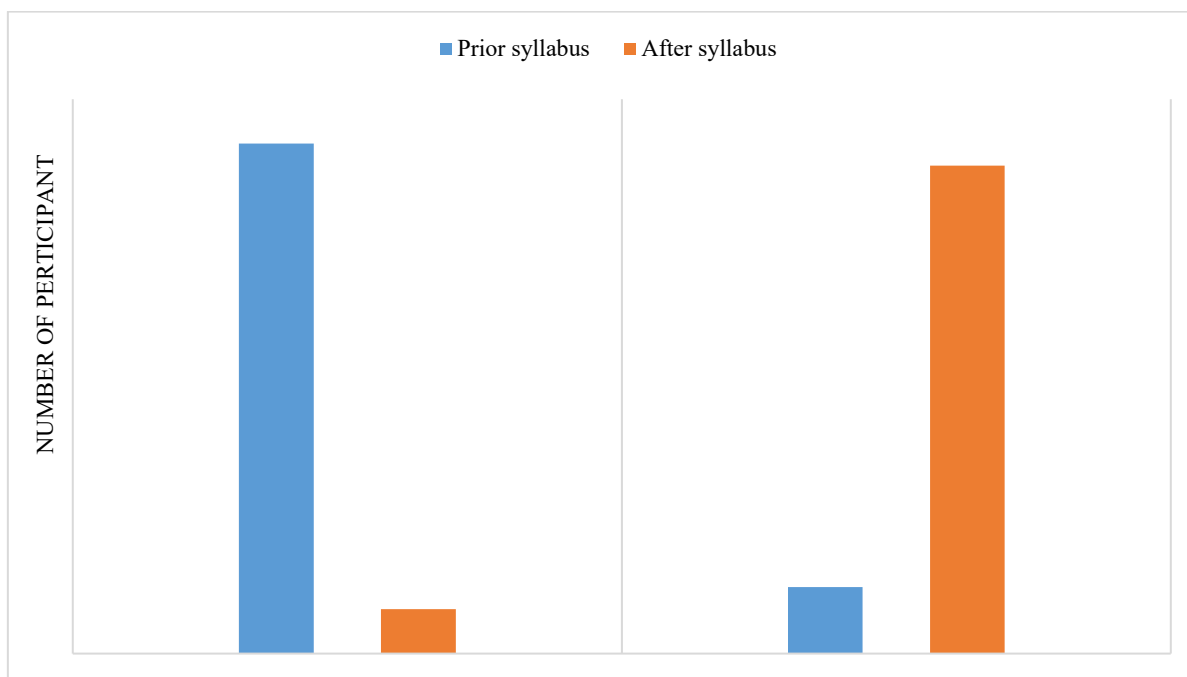


Figure 1. Comparison of Learners' Performance before and after the Application of Designed Syllabus

Summary of Findings

All adult learners showed measurable improvement after the application of the Basic English Language syllabus

- Illiterate adult learners demonstrated the most significant progress in confidence and performance
- Seven learners achieved first-class pass results in the post-test
- Learners performed better in listening and speaking skills after structured basic instruction
- Fear and hesitation toward English language learning were noticeably reduced
- The results confirm that a basic, structured syllabus is effective for adult learners with little or no formal education

Conclusion

The study concludes that illiterate adult learners in Mirpur face significant difficulties in learning English due to limited educational backgrounds and migration-driven pressures linked to settlement requirements in the United Kingdom. Despite these challenges, the implementation of a structured Basic English syllabus demonstrated noticeable improvement in learners' confidence, communication skills, and test performance. The findings highlight the urgent need for short, skill-based English courses designed specifically for adult illiterate learners. The study recommends that the Government and Ministry of Education of AJK develop accessible English teaching materials and utilize existing institutions to support migration-oriented adult learners effectively.

Statements and Declarations

Ethics Approval

The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and Ethical Review Board of the Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad, Pakistan (Reg#13KBR00754).

Competing Interests

The authors have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Author Contributions

Ummara Hassan contributed to study concept and design, collected/analysed data, project administration and drafted the original manuscript. All other Authors contributed to methodology, data curation, investigation, visualization, analysis, review and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. The authors declare that all data were generated in-house, that no paper mill was used and that no AI tool has been used for the generation of text or figures.

Data Availability Statement

The information supporting this study is available in this article.

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