



EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CAPACITY-BUILDING INTERVENTIONS ON EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL (TaRL) IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF DISTRICT DERA ISMAIL KHAN, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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**Abstract:** This study explores the perceptions and training needs of primary school teachers in Dera Ismail Khan regarding the implementation of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and employing a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and headteachers involved in TaRL programs. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, revealed two major themes: initial unfamiliarity with the TaRL methodology and the demand for contextualized, practical training. Participants shared that they lacked foundational knowledge about TaRL, often misunderstanding it as a remedial strategy rather than a learner-centered approach. Many teachers struggled to shift from traditional grade-level teaching due to limited exposure and inadequate professional preparation. Moreover, teachers emphasized the need for slow-paced, hands-on training tailored to local classroom realities, along with language-sensitive materials and ongoing support through refresher courses and peer collaboration. These findings underscore the critical importance of localized, sustained capacity-building efforts to ensure the effective implementation of TaRL in under-resourced educational settings. The study recommended that there is a dire need of professional training program about TaRL approach to implement effectively at classroom practices.

**Keywords:** Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), Teacher Training, Primary Education

## INTRODUCTION

Despite increased enrollment in primary education across the Global South, a substantial number of children continue to lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills. The 2023 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report underscores that over half of Grade 3 students in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read a simple text or perform basic arithmetic operations (UNESCO, 2023). This alarming trend signals not only a learning crisis but also a pedagogical gap in traditional teaching approaches that assume uniform learning levels based on age or grade. Consequently, educators and policymakers are increasingly exploring alternative instructional



models tailored to children's actual learning needs. One of the most promising innovations addressing this challenge is Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)—a pedagogical approach that assesses children's current learning levels and groups them accordingly for targeted instruction. Initiated by Pratham in India and later adapted across several African countries, TaRL has shown strong evidence in improving foundational outcomes when properly implemented (Banerjee et al., 2020). The core idea is simple yet powerful: tailor the teaching to the learner, not to the curriculum. While the design of TaRL is evidence-based and adaptable, its success heavily depends on how well teachers are prepared and supported to deliver the intervention.

Capacity-building interventions including teacher training, mentorship, coaching, and ongoing support—play a pivotal role in ensuring the fidelity and quality of TaRL implementation. A study by RTI International (2022) highlights that without sufficient investment in capacity development, TaRL interventions may fail to achieve intended learning gains. Teachers often require not just initial training, but continuous mentoring and real-time feedback to shift from traditional instruction to activity-based, student-level teaching. As such, teacher empowerment through sustained support becomes the linchpin of effective delivery.

While quantitative studies have measured learning gains from TaRL interventions, there is a notable lack of qualitative research capturing teachers' voices—how they perceive, internalize, and apply capacity-building support in their day-to-day classroom practice. Most program evaluations have focused on student outcomes, leaving a significant gap in understanding the experiential and professional development dimensions of teachers within TaRL ecosystems (Chavan & Banerji, 2023). Given that teachers are the primary implementers of such reforms, their perspectives are essential to uncovering the real-world complexities of program delivery.

Moreover, in many contexts where TaRL is implemented, particularly in rural and multilingual schools, educators face additional barriers such as large class sizes, limited resources, language mismatches, and lack of instructional materials. In these settings, capacity-building interventions must go beyond generic training sessions and be context-responsive, culturally sensitive, and practically applicable. However, there is limited research examining how such challenges influence the effectiveness of training and mentorship under TaRL models (Piper et al., 2021).

Another emerging area of concern is the scalability and sustainability of capacity-building frameworks supporting TaRL. As the model is mainstreamed through national systems, questions arise about how to ensure consistent and high-quality teacher support, especially in low-resource environments. Findings from large-scale implementations, such as Kenya's Tusome literacy program, show that teacher coaching and feedback loops are critical in ensuring long-term impact (Piper et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these findings are primarily programmatic, highlighting the need for deeper qualitative insights into what makes capacity-building effective from the teacher's point of view. In light of these gaps, this study aims to explore how capacity-building interventions—specifically teacher training, mentorship, and ongoing support—influence the effective implementation of TaRL in primary schools. By using a qualitative lens, the research seeks to uncover the lived experiences of teachers, the perceived usefulness of professional development, and the contextual enablers or constraints that shape instructional practice. The findings will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how to design and deliver effective teacher support mechanisms for foundational learning reforms in diverse educational settings. Although the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach has



demonstrated significant impact on foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes, much of the existing research has focused on quantitative learning gains, scalability, and cost-effectiveness (Banerjee et al., 2020; RTI International, 2022). While these studies confirm the efficacy of the model in improving student performance, they often overlook the qualitative dimensions of implementation, particularly from the perspective of the teachers tasked with delivering the intervention. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence exploring how teachers experience and respond to capacity-building interventions such as training, mentorship, and instructional coaching. Most implementation frameworks assume that once trained, teachers will automatically adopt and apply TaRL techniques effectively. However, recent findings suggest that one-time training is insufficient without sustained mentorship, contextual adaptation, and reflective practice (Chavan & Banerji, 2023; Piper et al., 2021). Yet, few studies have investigated how these support mechanisms are perceived by teachers and how they influence classroom-level fidelity to the TaRL approach.

Another significant gap exists in understanding the contextual challenges faced by teachers, especially in low-resource, multilingual, or multigrade classrooms. In such settings, the success of any intervention, including TaRL, depends heavily on how well capacity-building efforts are tailored to local realities. However, there is a scarcity of qualitative research that explores these complex and dynamic factors from a ground-level perspective.

Finally, as TaRL is being mainstreamed into national education systems, there is an urgent need to examine how capacity-building structures—such as coaching, peer learning, and feedback loops—function within formal institutions, rather than within NGO-led pilots. Understanding teachers' real-world experiences with these systems can inform more effective policy design and professional development strategies. In light of these gaps, this study seeks to contribute original insights by exploring the lived experiences of primary school teachers with capacity-building interventions in the context of TaRL implementation, thereby addressing a critical but under-researched area in the foundational learning discourse. The objectives and research questions of the study given below:-

### **Research Objectives**

1. To explore how capacity-building interventions such as teacher training, mentorship, and instructional support influence the effective implementation of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in primary schools.
2. To examine primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the relevance, adequacy, and challenges of the capacity-building support provided during TaRL implementation.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do capacity-building interventions—such as training, mentorship, and instructional support—contribute to the effective implementation of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in primary schools? (In-line with RO-1)
2. What are primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the relevance and challenges of the capacity-building support they receive for TaRL implementation? (In-line with RO-2)



## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL): A Foundational Learning Strategy**

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), originally developed by Pratham in India, is an evidence-based remedial education approach aimed at improving foundational literacy and numeracy among primary-level learners. Unlike conventional grade-based instruction, TaRL groups students by learning level and adjusts teaching methods accordingly. Numerous evaluations have confirmed its effectiveness in raising basic learning outcomes across various contexts (Banerjee et al., 2020; Crouch et al., 2021). However, while the core pedagogy of TaRL is widely appreciated, implementation challenges remain, especially when scaling the model beyond controlled pilot environments. Capacity-building for teachers—through training, coaching, and continuous professional support—is essential for the successful execution of TaRL. Training modules typically focus on diagnosing student learning levels, using structured lesson plans, and applying engaging pedagogies. Nonetheless, studies show that short-term or one-time workshops are often insufficient. Effective implementation requires deeper instructional mentoring, frequent feedback, and sustained peer engagement (Chavan & Banerji, 2023). Without these elements, teachers may revert to traditional rote methods, thereby diluting the impact of TaRL.

### **Mentorship and Ongoing Professional Support**

Mentorship plays a critical role in helping teachers translate TaRL strategies into day-to-day classroom practices. Piper et al. (2021) emphasized that teachers perform better when they receive regular coaching and have access to classroom-based feedback. Mentorship provides a space for reflective dialogue, adaptation, and reinforcement of instructional practices. In some successful cases, school-based mentors have acted as catalysts, boosting teachers' confidence and ownership of the approach. However, where mentorship is absent or inconsistent, fidelity to the TaRL model tends to weaken.

### **Teachers' Perceptions and Local Realities**

Teachers' lived experiences offer valuable insights into the practical barriers and enablers of TaRL implementation. For example, multilingual settings, large class sizes, and pressure to follow national curricula often complicate the adaptation of the TaRL methodology (UNESCO, 2023). Studies have shown that teachers are more likely to engage with new pedagogies when they find the training contextually relevant and aligned with their classroom realities (RTI International, 2022). Therefore, understanding teachers' perspectives is essential for designing responsive and sustainable capacity-building frameworks.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature and Need for Qualitative Insights**

Most existing TaRL studies are quantitative, emphasizing improvements in test scores or enrollment outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2020). However, these assessments often overlook the human element—the challenges, motivations, and adaptations made by educators in diverse settings. A qualitative exploration of how teachers experience capacity-building—what they find useful, insufficient, or culturally mismatched—remains largely underexplored. Recent research has called for context-specific, teacher-centered studies to deepen understanding and improve the implementation of foundational learning reforms (World Bank, 2024).

### **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and Pakistan's Learning Crisis**

Pakistan faces a deep-rooted foundational learning crisis where millions of primary school students struggle to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills despite being enrolled in school.



ASER Pakistan (2023) reports that over 55% of Grade 5 students in rural areas cannot read a Grade 2-level sentence in Urdu or perform simple arithmetic. In response, TaRL has emerged as a promising remedial strategy, offering flexible and level-based grouping to support foundational learning. TaRL pilots by organizations like ITA (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi) have shown encouraging results in improving early grade competencies when adapted to local linguistic and cultural realities (ITA, 2022).

### **Capacity-Building as a Catalyst for TaRL Effectiveness**

Effective teacher training and instructional support are central to the success of TaRL programs in Pakistan. Capacity-building initiatives typically focus on teaching diagnostic tools, grouping techniques, and activity-based pedagogy. However, in many cases, these trainings are one-off sessions without continuous support. Without consistent mentorship and follow-up, many teachers find it difficult to apply TaRL techniques in overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms (Khan & Mahmood, 2021). This suggests a pressing need to rethink capacity-building models to make them more context-sensitive and sustainable.

### **Role of Mentorship and Peer Learning**

Ongoing mentorship, peer coaching, and reflective practices are critical elements often missing in Pakistani school systems. Research in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shows that teachers implementing TaRL with access to school-based mentors performed significantly better in facilitating student learning outcomes than those with limited support (Ahmed et al., 2023). Mentorship also builds teachers' confidence and allows them to adapt the TaRL framework creatively based on their classroom realities, language preferences, and learner needs.

### **Teacher Perceptions and Ground Realities**

Teachers in Pakistan often work under rigid administrative frameworks with heavy curriculum loads and limited autonomy. In such settings, implementing TaRL poses a dual challenge: aligning with government mandates while experimenting with level-based grouping. Studies have found that when teachers are involved in the design and contextual adaptation of TaRL, their motivation and commitment increase (Farooq & Haq, 2022). Conversely, lack of localized materials, overburdened timetables, and language mismatches can discourage sustained implementation.

### **Implementation Challenges in Diverse Pakistani Classrooms**

Pakistan's classrooms are marked by multilingual diversity, overage learners, and inconsistent student attendance. TaRL's success depends not only on teacher training but also on the adaptability of materials, classroom structures, and assessment tools. A qualitative study by RISE Pakistan (2023) highlights that teachers need practical tools and localized training modules to conduct effective group-based instruction. National-level curriculum policies have yet to fully accommodate such differentiated pedagogies, limiting institutional backing for TaRL expansion.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Philosophy**

Guided by the interpretivist paradigm, this research recognizes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective experiences of individuals. Since educational practices and teacher development vary significantly depending on context, the interpretive stance allows for meaning-making through interaction, dialogue, and reflection. This



philosophical lens supports the aim of understanding how educators perceive and internalize the impact of capacity-building on their instructional practices within the TaRL framework.

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how capacity-building interventions such as training, mentorship, and instructional support contribute to the effective implementation of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in primary schools of district D.I.Khan, KP. A qualitative approach is deemed appropriate given the need to understand the in-depth perspectives, beliefs, and lived experiences of teachers and school stakeholders involved in TaRL implementation. This method allows for contextual, nuanced, and detailed data collection, which is particularly important in exploring the challenges and success factors related to capacity-building in diverse school environments.

### **Population and Sampling**

The target population for this study includes primary school teachers and head-teachers involved in TaRL implementation across selected public schools in Dera Ismail Khan. A purposive sampling technique was employed. The sample size comprised 12–15 participants, ensuring a diverse range of voices across gender, experience, and geographic backgrounds while maintaining manageable data saturation.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their experiences and opinions openly while enabling the researcher to probe deeper on specific themes. An interview guide was developed, informed by the literature and aligned with the research questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via phone/video call depending on accessibility, and each session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Informed consent was obtained, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret and categorize the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report. This method facilitated the identification of patterns and themes related to teacher training and perceived effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives. Manual coding methods were used depending on the volume and complexity of the data.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails were used. Participants were provided with summaries of their interview transcripts to verify the accuracy of interpretation. Peer researchers also reviewed emerging themes to avoid personal bias. Thick description and direct quotations from participants were used to ensure authenticity and depth in representation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was taken both verbally and in written form. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect identities. Data were stored securely, and all ethical guidelines were followed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Theme-1: Initial Unfamiliarity with TaRL Approach**

At the onset of the intervention, several teachers openly expressed that they were unfamiliar with the concept and practices of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). This lack of prior exposure led to confusion, hesitation, and misconceptions about how to group students, conduct assessments, and shift from grade-based to level-based instruction. The unfamiliarity highlighted a significant training and orientation gap at the foundational stage of the program.

#### **Subtheme 1.1: Misconceptions about Level-Based Learning**

Many teachers initially misunderstood TaRL as a remedial program for “weak students” rather than a pedagogical strategy for all learners based on ability.

“At first, I thought TaRL was only for the slow children. I didn’t realize it’s for every child, grouped by learning level, not by grade.” — *Teacher A*

“We were used to teaching one lesson to the whole class. It took time to accept that students in the same grade can be at very different levels.” — *Teacher B*

“I didn’t hear the term TaRL because we only use traditional method of teaching.” *Teacher E*

#### **Subtheme 1.2: Difficulty in Shifting from Traditional Practices**

Teachers shared that they had never been trained in classroom practices that required ongoing assessment and flexible grouping. As a result, they initially struggled with planning and classroom management.

“Nobody had taught us to check reading levels before teaching. We always just followed the textbook and syllabus.” — *Teacher C*

“The idea of changing groups based on performance was new for me. I was confused about how to handle it practically.” — *Teacher D*

#### **Subtheme 1.3: Need for Foundational Orientation**

Several teachers recommended that future training programs begin with a simple introduction to what TaRL is, why it matters, and how it differs from regular instruction, especially for teachers new to the concept.

“We jumped straight into activities in training, but I didn’t really understand the purpose at first. I wish someone had explained the overall idea first.” — *Teacher E*

“A short video or session explaining what TaRL is and why it works would help new teachers like me.” — *Teacher F*

### **Theme 2: Demand for Comprehensive and Contextualized TaRL Training**

Teachers in D.I. Khan reported a strong need for structured, context-sensitive training on Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), particularly at the primary education level. Many educators indicated that existing professional development opportunities rarely covered learner-centered or level-based approaches. As a result, the initial exposure to TaRL was overwhelming, and ongoing support was seen as essential to master its principles and practices.

#### **Subtheme 2.1: Need for Step-by-Step Practical Training**

Several teachers emphasized that they need training on TaRL approach. They requested future trainings to be more practical, sequenced, and localized.

“We need slow and clear demonstrations — not just theory. If we could try out the grouping, reading tools, and activities during training, it would help more.” — *Teacher G*



“I teach in a very small rural school. My situation is different from what they show in training videos. We need practical models that match our context.” — *Teacher H*

### **Subtheme 2.2: Orientation in Assessment and Grouping Techniques**

Teachers repeatedly noted that TaRL’s diagnostic assessment and group formation strategies were both new and challenging. They needed deeper guidance on how to carry them out accurately and sustainably in real classroom conditions.

“I understood the idea of checking levels, but I wasn’t confident doing it myself. More time on practice and examples would have helped.” — *Teacher I*

“Forming and reforming groups every week is tricky when you don’t have enough time or helpers. We need tips from real classroom scenarios.” — *Teacher J*

### **Subtheme 2.3: Training on Local Language and Learning Materials**

Many participants also expressed that training should be given in easy language. Communication of trainers should be proper and smooth. So we can implement TaRL in a proper way. They emphasized the need for locally adapted resources and training that address language gaps and reflect community realities.

“Some of our children don’t speak Urdu fluently. The training should be given in easy language.” — *Teacher K*

“Reading materials in our training should be suitable. We need storybooks and texts that our children understand.” — *Teacher L*

### **Subtheme 2.4: Follow-Up Support and Refresher Sessions**

Participants unanimously agreed that one-time training is not enough for sustainable TaRL implementation. They advocated for periodic refresher courses, on-site mentoring, and peer-sharing forums to continuously build confidence and resolve challenges.

“After training, we’re alone again. A short refresher every term would really help keep us updated and confident.” — *Teacher M*

“We learn from each other’s ideas. If trainers organized small cluster groups, we could share what works in our schools.” — *Teacher N*

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study underscore a significant training gap in the initial implementation phase of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in primary schools of Dera Ismail Khan. Many teachers revealed that they had no prior understanding of TaRL, leading to misconceptions and hesitation in applying its principles. This aligns with international research indicating that unfamiliar pedagogical models often face resistance when introduced without sufficient orientation (Pritchett & Beatty, 2020; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Teachers initially viewed TaRL as a remedial intervention for underachieving students rather than a holistic, level-based instructional strategy applicable to all learners. Such misinterpretations are not uncommon in contexts where traditional, grade-based instruction is the norm (Banerjee et al., 2022).

Another critical insight from the study was the demand for contextualized and sequential training. Teachers in D.I. Khan specifically requested slow-paced, practice-oriented workshops that allow them to internalize and apply TaRL strategies in environments similar to their own. This is supported by Singh et al. (2023), who emphasize that effective teacher professional development must be both practical and context-sensitive. The absence of localized models or language-appropriate learning materials further complicated teachers' ability to implement TaRL.



effectively. These challenges suggest that even well-designed pedagogical innovations like TaRL may fall short if implementation is not accompanied by adaptive training frameworks. The subthemes also highlighted the necessity of ongoing support systems, including refresher courses and peer collaboration. One-time training sessions, while useful for initial exposure, fail to sustain long-term behavioral change or pedagogical innovation without continuous reinforcement (Westbrook et al., 2021). Teachers in the study expressed a clear preference for regular follow-up, hands-on mentorship, and peer-learning networks, echoing broader literature on the effectiveness of collaborative professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Bashir et al., 2023). Furthermore, when operating in multilingual classrooms, teachers found it challenging to engage learners in Urdu, indicating the critical need for culturally and linguistically responsive instructional materials and teacher preparation. Collectively, these findings affirm that the successful implementation of TaRL is contingent not just on training provision but also on **how** that training is designed, delivered, and sustained. For regions like D.I. Khan, where teachers often work in under-resourced and linguistically diverse environments, the emphasis must shift from generic capacity-building to localized, iterative, and responsive professional development strategies.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study reveal that a majority of primary school teachers, particularly in D.I. Khan, were initially unfamiliar with the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. This unfamiliarity created confusion regarding core instructional strategies, such as level-based grouping and formative assessments. Teachers often misunderstood TaRL as a remedial model rather than a structured, inclusive method to address diverse learning needs. Their reflections highlighted not only a foundational gap in understanding but also a pressing demand for comprehensive, context-relevant training. It is therefore evident that successful implementation of TaRL hinges on equipping teachers with targeted professional development opportunities, including step-by-step practical training, language-sensitive materials, and ongoing refresher sessions to ensure both clarity and confidence in delivering the TaRL methodology effectively.

### **Practical and Policy Implications**

The findings of this study underscore key practical and policy implications for enhancing the effective implementation of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in primary schools, especially in rural regions like D.I. Khan. Practically, there is a critical need for context-specific training programs, regular refresher courses, and structured peer collaboration platforms to support teachers in applying TaRL techniques confidently. Teachers expressed a strong demand for simplified assessment tools and ongoing mentorship, which can bridge the gap between training and classroom realities. On the policy front, it is essential to embed TaRL strategies into pre-service and in-service teacher education curricula, allocate dedicated resources for sustained professional development, and adopt localized policies that account for the unique challenges of rural schools, such as linguistic diversity and resource limitations. Furthermore, fostering collaborations between government, NGOs, and local communities can ensure that training delivery is responsive, materials are accessible, and implementation remains sustainable over time. These integrated measures can significantly enhance student learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness in under-resourced settings.



### Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of capacity-building interventions in implementing Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in primary schools, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was confined to a limited number of primary schools in specific districts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or provinces of Pakistan. Second, since this was a qualitative inquiry based on teacher narratives and perceptions, the study may not capture measurable outcomes of TaRL effectiveness, such as student achievement data or long-term learning gains. Furthermore, there is a possibility of respondent bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers during interviews or focus group discussions. Lastly, due to time and logistical constraints, perspectives from district-level education officers or parents were not included, which could have enriched the understanding of the broader support ecosystem for TaRL.

### Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study. The research was conducted independently and was not influenced by any external funding agency, organization, or stakeholder that may have a vested interest in the outcomes of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) initiative.

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