

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TRANSFER OF STUDENTS  
BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC BASIC SCHOOLS: A  
STUDY IN ERBIL AND SULAYMANIYAH

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تحقيق في انتقال الطلاب بين المدارس الأساسية الخاصة والحكومية في أربيل والسليمانية

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صلاح الدين - أربيل

**Abstract**

This study examines the causes and challenges of student transfers between private and public basic schools in the city centres of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This trend is rapidly growing but remains underexplored in this context. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines surveys with 103 EFL teachers and semi-structured interviews with 20 parents, the study investigates why students transfer and the main academic and behavioral challenges faced by EFL teachers. Findings reveal that the top reasons cited by parents include improving the educational environment, teacher-related factors, school performance, financial considerations, better English language acquisition, and school proximity. Teachers, on the other hand, reported significant difficulties with transfer students, such as academic decline, stress, curriculum adjustment issues, and challenges with English language skills across all four domains, especially reading problems related to pronunciation, listening comprehension, and limited oral fluency. The research aims to inform policymakers, school administrators, and teachers in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) on how to better support transfer students and reduce educational inequality. The findings offer important policy recommendations, including curriculum bridging programs, comprehensive EFL language interventions, increased teacher diagnostics and confidence-building training, improved transfer monitoring processes, demonstrations of public-school bilingual programs, and low tuition plans in private schools for low-income families. **Keywords:** Transfer Factors and Challenges, Public School, Private School, EFL Student Transfer

**الملخص**

تبحث هذه الدراسة في أسباب وتحديات انتقال الطلاب بين المدارس الأساسية الخاصة والحكومية في مراكز مدينتي السليمانية وأربيل في إقليم كردستان العراق. هذا الاتجاه يشهد نموًا سريعًا ولكنه ما زال غير مدروس بشكل كافٍ في هذا السياق. وباستخدام منهجية مختلطة تجمع بين الاستبيانات والمقابلات شبه المهيكلة مع ١٠٣ من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية و ٢٠ من أولياء الأمور، تستقصي الدراسة أسباب انتقال الطلاب وأهم التحديات الأكاديمية والسلوكية التي يواجهها معلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تكشف النتائج أن أبرز الأسباب التي ذكرها أولياء الأمور تشمل تحسين البيئة التعليمية، والعوامل المتعلقة بالمعلمين، وأداء المدرسة، والاعتبارات المالية، وتحسين اكتساب اللغة الإنجليزية، وقرب

المدرسة من المنزل. في المقابل، أفاد المعلمون أنهم يواجهون صعوبات كبيرة مع الطلاب المتنقلين، مثل التراجع الأكاديمي، والضغط النفسي، ومشكلات التكيف مع المناهج الدراسية، والتحديات المتعلقة بمهارات اللغة الإنجليزية في المجالات الأربعة، وخاصة مشاكل القراءة المرتبطة بالنطق، وفهم الاستماع، وضعف الطلاقة الشفوية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تزويد صناع السياسات، ومديري المدارس، والمعلمين في إقليم كردستان العراق برؤى حول كيفية دعم الطلاب المتنقلين وتقليل التفاوت التعليمي. كما تقدم النتائج توصيات سياسية مهمة، بما في ذلك برامج لربط المناهج، وتدخلات شاملة لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وزيادة تدريب المعلمين على التشخيص وبناء الثقة، وتحسين عمليات متابعة الانتقال، وتجربة برامج التعليم الثنائي اللغة في المدارس الحكومية، وخطط تخفيض الرسوم الدراسية في المدارس الخاصة للأسر ذات الدخل المحدود.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** عوامل وتحديات الانتقال، المدرسة الحكومية، المدرسة الأهلية، انتقال طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)

**1. Introduction** Student transfer behaviour, also known as “student mobility,” refers to students moving between educational institutions (Welsh, 2018). In recent decades, the educational landscape in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has undergone a significant transformation. The expansion of private education, coupled with ongoing issues in the public sector, has led to a rise in student relocations between public and private schools. Such movements are influenced by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, political, and educational factors, including perceived pedagogical quality, language of instruction, classroom environment, and prevailing cultural and familial expectations. Overcrowded classrooms, outdated curricula, and inadequately trained teachers are widespread issues in KRI public schools (Ali et al., 2021). Private schools often emphasize English language instruction, which has become increasingly popular among parents who associate it with improved academic outcomes and greater global opportunities (Paul & Ibrahim, 2025). This trend has led to educational stratification, raising concerns about equity and access across socioeconomic classes (Hassun, 2023). As noted by Bevans et al. (2007) and Titus (2007), educators are increasingly worried about student mobility. Mobile students have unique academic and social needs that must be addressed promptly, especially by EFL teachers. Despite the rise in school transfers, there is a clear lack of research on the motivations, patterns, and effects of these moves within the KRI. Existing studies tend to focus more on overall educational quality and language policy, rather than on what drives transfers or the experiences of educators and parents. This study aims to address that gap by examining the practical and policy implications of student transfers in the urban areas of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

**1.1 Statement of the Problem** Although public and private institutions operate side by side within the KRI's educational system, a comprehensive understanding of what motivates student transfer between the two sectors is lacking. Transfers are often driven by dissatisfaction with public schools or aspirations for better private education. However, these reasons have not been systematically studied in the region. Key factors such as perceived school quality, language of instruction, social influences, financial status, and levels of trust in institutions remain underexplored. Moreover, the lack of reliable data hampers the ability to identify trends or anticipate when transfers are most likely to occur. The academic, social, and institutional consequences of such mobility, ranging from adjustment issues and curriculum mismatches to cultural challenges, are also poorly understood. For EFL teachers, different student language abilities and prior curriculum exposure create challenges in teaching and assessment. Inconsistent familiarity with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation undermines classroom cohesion and student progress.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

This study aims to examine student transfers between public and private basic schools in the city centres of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. It focuses on several key aspects:

1. To assess the academic progress of transfer students.
2. To identify the reasons behind parents' decisions to transfer their children, with attention to academic quality, financial constraints, and personal preferences.
3. To examine EFL teachers' perceptions of the integration and performance of transfer students in the EFL classroom.
4. To explore the behavioural issues reported in relation to transferred students.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. What are the main factors leading parents to transfer their children from one school to another?
2. What are the most common challenges EFL teachers encounter in teaching transfer students in the EFL classroom?

## **2. Literature Review**

## 2.1. The Education System in the KRI

The education system in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is overseen by two ministries: the Ministry of Education (MOE), responsible for basic and preparatory education, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR), which manages higher education (Overview Education, 2014). The MOE is highly centralized, making all major decisions related to public education and overseeing private education. It includes 12 general directorates tasked with district-level administration, such as implementing curricula, managing school facilities, training teachers, conducting exams, and organizing extracurricular activities. Additionally, two directorates oversee minority education, one for Turkmen and the other for Assyrians (Vernez et al., 2014). Education accounts for a substantial share of the KRI responsibilities, with MOE personnel and students making up more than 40% of the population (Khalid, 2014, in Overview Education, 2014, p. 171). The current structure includes two years of non-compulsory preschool, nine years of compulsory basic education (ages 6–14), and three years of preparatory education (ages 15–17). Students may also opt for vocational secondary programs such as industrial and computing institutes. The MOE has also introduced policies aimed at reducing failure rates in early education (Overview Education, 2014; Vernez et al., 2016).

Education in KRI is divided between public and private sectors, each with distinct characteristics and challenges (Saeed, 2023). While public education is free and widely available, it suffers from chronic infrastructure problems, outdated curricula, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Many public schools operate in multiple shifts to manage overcrowding; over 10% of preschools and more than 30% of primary and preparatory schools follow this model (UNICEF, 2017). Since 1992, the private education sector has expanded rapidly. Once viewed with suspicion, private schools have gained popularity due to rising parental demand for higher-quality instruction and English-language education, seen as essential for global opportunity (Hassooni, 2024; Hassun, 2023). According to Toma, (2005) and Koinzer et al. (2017), private education globally falls into three categories: (1) state-funded but independently governed, (2) fully private in both funding and governance, and (3) hybrid models with limited public support. Most private schools in the KRI belong to the second category.

## 2.2. Challenges in the Education Sector in the KRI

UNICEF (2017) identifies several key push factors behind student transfers in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, including overcrowded classrooms, poor teacher training, outdated curricula, and inadequate infrastructure. The World Bank (2015) adds that substandard classroom conditions and a lack of learning materials further contribute to weak educational outcomes in KRI. Curriculum relevance is another concern. As Carnoy M & Levin H (1985) argue, educational content should reflect both global competencies and local cultural values to remain meaningful and effective. Financial and social incentives also play a vital role in student retention. Programs that offer free textbooks, school transportation, and meals help ease the financial burden on families, making public schools more attractive, especially for disadvantaged populations (UNESCO, 2016). Moreover, many public-school teachers in the KRI still lack current training in interactive pedagogy and educational technology, and are often assigned to subjects outside their specializations, which remains a major concern (Hammond, 2006). Nevertheless, the system faces major obstacles. Funding from the central Iraqi government has been inconsistent. The region has struggled to pay the public school teacher salaries (Hassun, 2023), and financial strain worsened after Baghdad's budget cuts, compounded by the fight against terrorism and the influx of refugees and internally displaced persons (The World Bank, 2015). Additionally, large class sizes and limited instructional time make it difficult to implement student-centred teaching practices in the KRI. Rising enrolment rates and curriculum demands further strain underprepared teachers. In contrast, private schools often offer English-medium instruction, which has become a key factor influencing family decisions (Hassun, 2023).

## 2.3. Factors Contributing to Student Transfer

Welsh (2018) categorizes student mobility into two types: *structural* and *non-structural*. *Structural mobility* refers to natural progression, such as moving from primary to secondary education. *Non-structural mobility* involves transferring between schools for personal, academic, or social reasons, such as dissatisfaction or relocation. Various factors drive student transfers. Research shows that financial constraints and academic challenges are among the most consistent predictors of student mobility and school retention (Blekic et al., 2020). These dynamics are particularly visible in the Kurdistan Region, where public school limitations and changing economic circumstances compel families to seek alternative educational settings. Access to learning resources and teacher-student rapport also significantly influence school choice. However, global policy debates often treat access and quality as separate issues, creating gaps in understanding (Kabay, 2021). Spaul & Taylor

(2012) propose the concept of "effective enrolment," which combines student attendance and academic performance data to give a clearer picture of educational engagement.

In the KRI, many parents prioritize quality when choosing private schools. Educational quality is associated with better facilities, qualified teachers, and the availability of learning materials (Hassun, 2023). Teachers report that family decisions are often influenced by whether schools meet students' individual needs, apply modern teaching methods, and show dedication to academic success (Adeogun, 2001; Vanderbrook, 2006)

Transfers may also be prompted by personal or social pressures. Students sometimes move to escape failure, adjust to changing family circumstances, or respond to cultural expectations. Wang et al. (2023) list transfer factors such as economic pressures, school reputation, future job prospects, and parental expectations. Similarly, Kasa et al. (2022) and Gard et al. (2012) point out that navigating unfamiliar administrative systems and adapting to new academic environments often proves difficult. In Kurdistan, student-teacher trust and rapport are especially crucial. Strong relationships improve academic motivation and resilience (Lee, 2007). Parents often view education as an investment in their children's future. As Damoc, (2017) states, academic and technical training prepare students for labour market demands. Those who receive curricula aligned with professional opportunities, particularly with industry involvement, gain a significant advantage (Kajanová, 2011; Kraak, 2015). Kurdish families with higher socioeconomic status often see English-medium instruction and digital technology as key tools for ensuring global competitiveness (Rahimova, 2023). Language and cultural considerations are also influential. Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a carrier of cultural identity (Rahimova, 2023). Byram (2012) asserts that embedding cultural understanding into language instruction fosters empathy and critical thinking. Schiffman (2001) highlights how culture and power influence language policies and usage. In the KRI, the language of instruction has changed over time from Arabic to Sorani Kurdish, Bahdini, and, more recently, English in certain subjects. These shifts reflect broader cultural and political tensions and affect student learning and comfort (Haig & Mustafa, 2019). Therefore, language may act as either a bridge or a barrier in school transfer decisions. According to a study by Subedi (2021), Economic hardship is the most cited cause of student movement between schools in the KRI: Many families cannot afford the expenses associated with private education, such as tuition, uniforms, and transportation. As a result, despite perceived weaknesses in quality, public education remains the only feasible option for lower-income families (Subedi, 2021). During times of economic crisis, these disparities become more pronounced. Budget cuts from Baghdad have led to delayed teacher salaries and insufficient infrastructure funding, significantly undermining public education (The World Bank, 2015). Financial resources and parental education levels strongly influence access to private schooling. Wealthier families have better access to information and options (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). In the KRI, decisions about school choice often revolve around fees, proximity, classroom size, and physical facilities, all of which impact the learning experience (Subedi, 2021). Additionally, dissatisfaction with the infrastructure and hygiene conditions in public schools motivates many families to transfer their children. Private schools often offer more diverse extracurricular activities, making them more appealing to parents who seek holistic educational environments for their children (Hassun, 2023).

#### 2.4. The Impact of Transfer on Students

Transfers can occur at any age and educational level, often marking the start of a transitional phase for students. These transitions are associated with a range of challenges, including academic disruption, decreased self-esteem, difficulty forming peer relationships, and behavioural issues (Rumberger et al., 1999). Academic development often stalls after a transfer due to inconsistencies in curriculum, unfamiliar teaching styles, and differing academic expectations (Galton et al., 2003). This disruption—commonly referred to as "transfer shock"—is typically accompanied by a temporary drop in academic performance (Hills, 1965; Wigfield et al., 1991). Eccles et al. (1993) argue that students in competitive new environments may lose confidence, resulting in diminished motivation and self-worth. Transfers also impact student motivation and self-esteem. Adolescents, in particular, may develop negative perceptions of their academic abilities and schooling in general when placed in unfamiliar, high-pressure settings (Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield et al., 1991). This can lead to disengagement, particularly if students fear failure or embarrassment. Ganeson & Ehrich (2009) found that disruptions in peer interaction often result in feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Thus, successful social integration is critical for the academic and emotional adjustment of transfer students. Without adequate support, students must rebuild social networks and adapt to new group dynamics on their own, increasing their psychological strain. Behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties often overlap during the transfer process. Students face emotional

stress from adjusting to new rules, social expectations, and classroom norms (Measor & Woods, 1984; Youngman, 1978). According to Delamont & Galton (1986), these distractions can hinder academic focus and performance. Elias et al. (1985) note that school transfers challenge students' coping mechanisms by introducing changes in roles, routines, and peer groups. Such pressures can delay personal development and cause prolonged adjustment difficulties (Crockett et al., 1989).

#### 2.5. Challenges Teachers Encounter with Transfer Students

Transfer students often present unique academic and psychological challenges for teachers, particularly in English language classrooms. Teaching English in regions where it is not the primary language is already demanding (Chen, 2007; Long, 1969; Nunn, 2011). In the KRI, these difficulties are compounded by limited real-world exposure to English and inconsistent prior instruction (Zughoul, 2003).

##### A. Academic Challenges

Transfers frequently interrupt students' academic continuity, affecting grades and knowledge retention (Rumberger, 2003). Differences in curricula, teaching methods, and assessment styles make it difficult for teachers to address learning gaps, especially in under-resourced schools.

##### B. Curriculum Challenges

Curricular discrepancies pose significant obstacles. Students who transfer mid-term often miss foundational lessons, leading to confusion in advanced topics. Additionally, changes in the language of instruction e.g., from Arabic to Kurdish or English create cognitive overload that affects comprehension and expression (Ghafar & Amin, 2022).

##### C. Psychological Challenges

Changing schools can cause psychological stress, reducing students' classroom participation and engagement. Students may become anxious, withdrawn, and fearful of making mistakes (Fatiloro, 2015; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1994; Ur, 1996). Adjusting to new teaching and social norms adds to this burden (Ciğerci & Güngör, 2016).

##### D. Teaching English Language Skills Challenges

For EFL teachers, supporting transfer students in developing language skills is particularly challenging. Communication is central to EFL instruction (Shakibaei & Keivan, 2014), yet transfer students often struggle with vocabulary, which affects both comprehension and production (Coady. & Huckin., 1997).

##### 1. Speaking Skills

Most transfer students hesitate to speak in English due to fear of making mistakes (Ur, 1991, as cited in Ghafar & Amin, 2022). Issues with pronunciation and limited vocabulary hinder effective expression. Kurdish learners, in particular, often mispronounce vowel sounds, leading to misunderstanding.

##### 2. Listening Skills

Listening comprehension is usually weak due to insufficient exposure to authentic English and inconsistent prior instruction. Students struggle with varied accents and dialects (Lynch, 2008, as cited Abrar, 2016), requiring teachers to frequently paraphrase, which slows down lessons (Nor et al., 2015).

##### 3. Reading Skills

Reading is affected by students' unfamiliarity with academic texts. Poor pronunciation impacts fluency, while limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge reduce comprehension. Teachers report that vocabulary deficits pose a more serious barrier than grammar issues (Nor et al., 2015).

##### 4. Writing Skills

Writing poses difficulties, particularly in grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation (Shatz & Wilkinson, 2010). Limited vocabulary also restricts students' ability to articulate ideas. Overcrowded classes and limited time for personalized feedback further hinder writing progress (Cai, 1993; Nor et al., 2015). Apart from the four skills, mismatched proficiency levels, lack of resources, and inadequate teacher preparation add to the challenge (Mathews-Aydinli & van Horne, 2006, as cited in Safari & Rashidi, 2015). Resistance to change is also common. Despite these barriers, teachers must fill learning gaps, modify instruction, and provide emotional support (Chindia et al., 2024; Xanthou & Pavlou, 2010).

#### 3. Methodology

This study used a **mixed-methods approach**, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews with selected parents were conducted to gather qualitative data. The quantitative aspect involved a survey questionnaire, with items structured using a five-point Likert scale format. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)**.

### 3.1 Participants

This study involved **20 parents** from basic schools located in the city centres of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The participants were equally distributed between the two city centres studied: **Sulaimani** and **Erbil**, each representing 50% of the sample (10 out of 20 participants from each city). The aim was to examine the factors that motivate them to transfer their children between schools. The parents were randomly selected from both public and private schools, with a specific focus on those who had already transferred their children. Additionally, **103 English language teachers** from basic schools participated in the questionnaire. These teachers were selected using purposive sampling to include those EFL teachers who have students recently transferred to their classes to understand how the students' challenges are dealt with. A total of **103 participants** responded, **51.5% from public schools** and **48.5% from private schools**. Of these, **53.4% were from Sulaymaniyah** and **46.6% from Erbil**. The largest subgroup (37.9%) consisted of teachers with more than 15 years of experience.

**3.2 Methods of Analysis** A mixed-methods approach was used to analyse the data. The **interview data** were analysed using **thematic analysis** following (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six phases, while the **questionnaire data** were entered and analysed through SPSS. Statistical methods were employed in general in this research to generate general insights into the characteristics and distribution of the research sample. This included the use of **frequency and percentage tables**. Furthermore, these statistical procedures were used (Validity test, Reliability test, Cronbach's Alpha, Weighted Mean, Standard Deviation, Relative Importance, Factor Analysis). These statistical measurements provided a comprehensive understanding of the collected data and supported the study's conclusions.

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability of the Tools

The instruments used in this study included a teacher questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with parents. Both instruments were reviewed by a panel of experts in linguistics and applied linguistics to ensure face validity (See Appendix 1 for details about the panel of experts). The panel provided feedback on the accuracy, clarity, and alignment of the items with the research questions. The correlation coefficients between individual items and their corresponding domains were calculated to confirm internal consistency. The results showed positive and acceptable correlations (0.40), indicating the questionnaire was reliable and internally consistent.

## 4. Results and Discussion

To respond to the first research question, the qualitative data obtained from interviews with parents consisted of **12 questions** organized into **three main themes: Social and Economic Factors** (Questions 1–7), **Academic Performance Factors** (Questions 8–10), and **School Facilities Factors** (Questions 11–12). These themes aimed to explore the main and most common reasons behind parents' decisions to transfer their children between schools. The factor analysis using **variance interpretation and principal components** revealed **five significant components**. Each component was defined by a unique cluster of variables, listed in descending order according to their item numbers. The first component, which includes the school educational environment such as personal development, emotional well-being, and social skills (Q7) and teacher-related factors such as presence in class, dedication to teaching, teacher-student relationships, and socio-economic challenges (e.g., boycotts and unpaid salaries) (6), has the highest level of influence, with communalities of 0.886 and 0.701, respectively. This demonstrates that parents place high importance on a positive school learning environment that nurtures character development, social competence, and emotional well-being alongside academic performance. A parent from Erbil City stated: "Educational factors were a primary reason for transferring our child, particularly the school's focus on students' well-being, behavior, social skills, and personal development." Additionally, teacher-related factors and the quality of instruction were crucial. According to Lee, (2007), positive teacher-student relationships foster interest and enthusiasm for learning, leading to higher educational attainment. This supports findings by (Adeogun, 2001; Tanoira, 2021; Vanderbrook, 2006) that emphasize the importance of teacher skill, interest, and overall student development in influencing school transfer decisions. A parent from Sulaymaniyah noted: "Teacher-related concerns were highly crucial in choosing a suitable school for my child, because public schools lacked personal attention, teacher-student relationships and curriculum were not completed because of frequent teachers' boycotts. This led most of the students to perform poorly in public schools." Flowing from this, the second highest component includes academic performance (Q8), financial factors (Q3), opportunity to improve language learning (Q10), and school proximity (Q4), with communalities ranging from 0.628 to 0.844. Together, they illustrate how parents balance quality and accessibility when

deciding to transfer their children's schools. Academic performance was the most determining element, with repeated concerns about instruction quality, curriculum, and school reputation. A parent from Erbil remarked: "The school's academic reputation, teaching methods, and curriculum were my main considerations when selecting a school to transfer my daughter to, because the previous school's academic performance was not good enough." This is consistent with the findings of (Wang et al., 2023), who found that academic quality, school reputation, and perceived teacher competency are important drivers of parental school choice, frequently intersecting with professional possibilities, economic necessity, and family goals. According to Galton et al. (2003) the way the curriculum is taught affects academic accomplishment. As students transfer, schools prioritize pedagogical tactics to sustain their progress. Financial issues were likewise a key focus in this regard. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the cost of private schooling, along with overall economic uncertainties and delayed public-sector wages, has a direct impact on parent choices. A typical case was cited as follows: The high cost of private education and delayed salary payments meant we could no longer afford private schooling for our children. For sure, financial factors played a significant role in my decision to choose a school for my children." This demonstrates how economic constraints do not exist in a vacuum but rather complement quality education. Hopes parents are frequently confronted with the necessity to balance cost and academic quality. Another distinguishing feature of this factor is its capacity to boost language learning, particularly in English. Parents in the KRI believe that English proficiency is a crucial skill for their children's professional objectives. This observation is consistent with Hassun, (2023) research, which found that the English language of teaching in private schools is a key motivator for school choice. One parent stated: "Yes, I wanted her to learn English at a young age because it will be important for her in the future, especially for getting a good job and building his career as this school is an English-based system. Finally, school proximity was considered a pragmatic but important aspect. Parents, especially those who transfer their children to a public cost school, emphasized that the distance of a school from home not only reduces transportation and travel fatigue but also guarantees safety and health for their children. The third component, which includes facilities influence (Q11) and Class size (Q9), with communalities of 0.874 and 0.705. This aspect is more pragmatic in terms of the physical and infrastructural learning environment of the school. A well-equipped school with modern infrastructure is not only desirable but also necessary for a comfortable, safe, and inspiring learning environment. Smaller class sizes are also highly regarded since they are likely to foster a more engaging and active learning environment, allowing instructors to better appreciate and pay attention to each student's skills, interests, and weaknesses. Such learning environments can have a direct impact on students' academic achievement, including exam scores and active engagement in activities. These comments are consistent with the findings of Subedi, (2021) which claim that quality school infrastructure and ideal class sizes have a major impact on learning experiences. "Class size had a clear impact. At the previous school, classes were overcrowded, and teachers couldn't pay attention to all the students." The fourth component contains Child's desire (Q2), with a communality of 0.810, indicates students' personal preferences influence transfer decisions. Parents consider their children's comfort, interests, and opinions while choosing schools. Previous research, such as that conducted by Wang et al. (2023) has demonstrated that active student involvement in learning can boost motivation and participation, thus improving learning outcomes. In this scenario, valuing the child's voice not only boosts his or her contentment with the school environment but also lessens resistance to the change process during transfer. The fifth component addresses social environment (Q5) and extracurricular activity (Q12), which parallel other criteria influencing parents' school transfer decisions. These reflect the social and developmental benefits that parents seek aside from academics. Family, peers, and public opinion can all have a significant impact on decisions, with parents frequently relying on trusted networks extended family, friends, or community groups via recommendations or word-of-mouth, emphasizing the social nature of school choice and the importance of reputational cues. Extracurricular activities are praised for developing social skills, collaboration, and self-esteem in students, as well as helping them discover personal interests outside of the classroom. Thus, the fifth component builds on the intellectual and practical focus of the previous components, adding a dimension of social and personal gain that parents regard as essential to effective education. Collectively, these factors show that school choice in Iraq's Kurdistan Region is a complex process that considers educational quality, economic factors, logistical issues, student independence, and social development opportunities. This complexity mirrors global trends while also reflecting local economic and cultural conditions. To answer the second research question, the teachers' questionnaire, composed of 24 closed-ended Likert-scale items, was divided into four sections. It was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the most common challenges EFL teachers faced with transfer students

in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah city centres. The frequencies, percentages were calculated to determine the strength of each item and its relevance to the respective section. Weighted means were calculated to determine item orientation, and standard deviations (SD) were used to measure dispersion in responses. As shown in Table 1. Table 1: Means, SD, and CV for teachers' most common challenges with transferred students.

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD	CV
	No.	No.	No.	No.	No.			
	%	%	%	%	%			
Section:1	Academic Performance Challenges							
1	5	6	17	60	15	3.72	0.95	25.53
	4.9	5.8	16.5	58.3	14.6			
2	3	20	26	41	13	3.40	1.03	30.23
	2.9	19.4	25.2	39.8	12.6			
3	2	17	16	56	12	3.57	0.96	26.91
	1.9	16.5	15.5	54.4	11.7			
4	1	6	17	52	27	3.95	0.86	21.85
	1	5.8	16.5	50.5	26.2			
5	5	15	27	47	9	3.39	1.00	29.44
	4.9	14.6	26.2	45.6	8.7			
Section 2	Psychological Effects							
6	6	18	16	46	17	3.49	1.13	32.45
	5.8	17.5	15.5	44.7	16.5			
7	2	9	23	56	13	3.67	0.87	23.83
	1.9	8.7	22.3	54.4	12.6			
8	6	14	27	41	15	3.44	1.08	31.32
	5.8	13.6	26.2	39.8	14.6			
Section 3	Curriculum Barriers							
9	4	11	22	49	17	3.62	1.01	27.78
	3.9	10.7	21.4	47.6	16.5			
10	1	9	16	60	17	3.81	0.85	22.29
	1	8.7	15.5	58.3	16.5			
11	3	12	24	55	9	3.53	0.91	25.80
	2.9	11.7	23.3	53.4	8.7			
12	1	13	20	52	17	3.69	0.92	25.06
	1	12.6	19.4	50.5	16.5			
Section 4	Challenges in Teaching English Language Skills to Transfer Students							
	Speaking							
13	4	7	19	50	23	3.79	0.99	26.19
	3.9	6.8	18.4	48.5	22.3			
14	4	13	11	63	12	3.64	0.97	26.75
	3.9	12.6	10.7	61.2	11.7			
15	2	17	21	47	16	3.56	1.00	28.11
	1.9	16.5	20.4	45.6	15.5			
	Listening							
16	2	6	18	64	13	3.78	0.81	21.49



	1.9	5.8	17.5	62.1	12.6			
17	3	8	29	53	10	3.57	0.88	24.54
	2.9	7.8	28.2	51.5	9.7			
18	2	13	14	53	21	3.76	0.98	26.08
	1.9	12.6	13.6	51.5	20.4			
Reading								
19	3	14	25	46	15	3.54	0.99	28.02
	2.9	13.6	24.3	44.7	14.6			
20	4	8	11	61	19	3.81	0.96	25.12
	3.9	7.8	10.7	59.2	18.4			
21	1	8	29	51	14	3.67	0.84	22.90
	1	7.8	28.2	49.5	13.6			
Writing								
22	4	24	20	48	7	3.29	1.02	31.01
	3.9	23.3	19.4	46.6	6.8			
23	2	15	24	55	7	3.49	0.89	25.56
	1.9	14.6	23.3	53.4	6.8			
24	0	14	26	49	14	3.61	0.88	24.47
	0	13.6	25.2	47.6	13.6			

**M:** is Weighted Mean, **SD:** is Standard Deviation, **CV:** is Coefficient of Variance

Among all the items, item 4 had the highest rate of agreement, with a mean score of 3.95. This implies that most teachers believe that transfer students face a significant academic decline after transferring, due to differences in teaching standards, timing, or curriculum differences between schools. This was closely followed by Item 10 ( $M = 3.81$ ), in which most teachers agreed that curriculum variation has a negative impact on student adjustment and adaptation to different education systems, especially in EFL classrooms. Item 20 (again,  $M = 3.81$ ) revealed an equally high level of concern about difficulties in reading comprehension caused by diversified instructional techniques or materials. In Academic Performance Challenges, Items 1-5 consistently recorded moderate to high mean values ( $M = 3.39$ - $3.95$ ). The highest item is 4. "Mid-year transfers make it more difficult for teachers to assist students in transitioning academically in EFL classrooms," indicating that the majority of EFL teachers perceive a decline in transfer students' academic achievement. The main difficulties raised were discontinuity in learning, inability to catch up with peers, and bad grades. This conclusion is consistent with other study findings by Clemens et al. (2017) and Rumberger (2003) who revealed that such movement disrupted learning and made pupils unable to remain academically focused. Under Psychological Effects section in the questionnaire, the findings show the highest rate was in item 7 stating "transfer students struggle with social adaptation and may feel isolated in their new EFL environment." and the second highest rate was in item 6 reading "school transfers negatively impact students' psychological well-being, leading to stress, anxiety, and reduced motivation in EFL classes." It shows that EFL teachers reported emotional instability and demotivation among transfer students. Items 6, 7, and 8 had mean scores ranging from 3.44 to 3.67, and most respondents believe that transfer students are more likely to experience emotional distress and limited participation. The response variability for this section (CVs ranging from 23.83 to 32.45) could be attributed to variances in students' school experiences or backgrounds. These findings support those of Fantuzzo et al. (2012) and Gruman et al. (2008) who discovered that student mobility had a significant impact on student achievement, academic motivation, and engagement among students; they attempted to account for the effects of shyness, low income, antisocial behavior, gender, and family stress. It was also revealed that all of these had a negative impact on students' academic performance and motivation. The third aspect, Curriculum Barriers, focused on structural obstacles. Items 9 to 12 showed high mean scores ( $M = 3.53$ - $3.81$ ), suggesting that teachers struggled to incorporate their instruction into what transfer students previously learned. Around three quarters (74.8%) of teachers believed that "transfer students often face difficulties adapting to different education systems, especially in EFL classroom settings." (Item 10), and 67% of the participating teachers indicated that "teachers face challenges in providing remedial support to transfer students who are behind in the English

curriculum." (Item 12). This is consistent with previous research findings by South et al. (2007) which emphasized the importance of curriculum consistency in ensuring transfer students' academic balance, and those by Clemens et al. (2017) who discovered that transfer could cause discontinuities in curriculum coverage. Thus, adjusting to a new learning environment can be time-consuming and affect academic success. The final section discussed challenges that arose while teaching the four English language skills. The most agreement was on items 13 and 16, which dealt with speaking and listening. For Item 13, "Teachers face challenges in helping transfer students develop oral fluency and pronunciation due to inconsistencies in their prior English instruction (e.g., different accents, teaching methods, or levels of exposure)" with a mean rate of 3.79. Some of the students struggled with pronouncing English words correctly. These findings were comparable to those of Songbatumis (2017) who discovered that most transfer students' mistakes were in pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and spelling, and that the majority of students made errors when pronouncing words, stress, and intonation. For listening, Item 16 "Transfer students' limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge hinder their ability to follow spoken instructions, requiring teachers to provide additional explanations frequently." had an agreement mean score of 3.78, which could be attributed to differences in accents, listening abilities, or classroom exposure. This outcome was consistent with Songbatumis (2017). He discovered that one of the most difficult aspects of teaching English in the classroom was students' lack of vocabulary proficiency, which limited students' understanding of the subject. Some students may lack language knowledge and understanding, which prevents them from actively participating in class. Notably, both reading comprehension and writing ability were also regarded to be areas of concern. Item 20 "Pronunciation difficulties affect students' ability to read aloud and recognize words accurately, increasing the need for teacher involvement," has the highest mean rate (3.81) in the reading section. Thus, some of the students struggled with pronouncing English words correctly. The findings were comparable to those of Songbatumis (2017) who discovered that students who have fewer opportunities to practice using the language are often afraid of making mistakes, particularly when pronouncing or spelling words incorrectly. In line with it, item 24 in writing skill "Teachers struggle to help transfer students understand and apply proper punctuation rules in English writing" had a mean rate of 3.61 in which teachers indicate that most transfer students struggled to come up with concepts and organize paragraphs properly and use punctuation correctly when writing essays. To sum up, teaching English as a foreign language can be tough in areas where English is not widely spoken. The highest two weighted mean among the statements being rated by the study sample, which is equal to (3.81) is in Item 20 "Pronunciation difficulties affect students' ability to read aloud and recognize words accurately, increasing the need for teacher involvement" with standard derivation (0.96), and in Item 10 "Transfer students often face difficulties adapting to different education systems, especially in EFL classroom settings." with standard derivation (0.85). The findings of this research question show that teacher readiness is an important variable in how mobility-related inequalities are controlled in EFL classes.

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that parental decisions to transfer schools in the KRI are motivated by a combination of quality and pragmatic factors, with the most influential being the school's educational environment, teacher quality, academic success, financial constraints, and language learning opportunities. The results also revealed several challenges that teachers encounter with transfer students in EFL classes, including academic decline, curricular inconsistency, and language skill-specific difficulties, with the most common concerns being reading problems related to pronunciation and adapting to various educational systems. In the context of the KRI, these findings have particular significance given the region's unique educational context, which includes substantial differences in curriculum offerings, teacher quality, and instruction language differences between private and public schools. School switching from public to private schools often reflects parents' desires for higher learning standards, English proficiency, and better facilities, but it also highlights systemic imbalances that must be addressed through regulation. Overall, this study offers new empirical insights from the Kurdistan Region, understanding that mobility-related factors and challenges in EFL learning are not only academic but also psychological and social. The results necessitate specific interventions, such as curriculum bridging programs, enhanced teacher training, and targeted language support, all tailored to the realities of the KRI education system, to ensure the successful integration and performance of transfer students in their new educational environments.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made for **policymakers and education authorities** in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq:

1. To meet the demand for English-medium or bilingual education, the MOE can pilot such programs in selected public schools, thereby reducing the incentive for families to switch to private institutions.
2. Teachers must receive targeted professional training on how to manage transfer students, with a focus on bridging curriculum discontinuities, emotional adjustment, and managing pronunciation, listening, and writing issues in EFL classrooms.
3. Partner with local universities to offer teacher training, internships, and collaborative projects that promote innovation and support under-resourced schools.
4. To address the most often reported challenges, the educational program should include more English language help, particularly in pronunciation, vocabulary development, and reading skill improvement.
5. Schools, particularly public ones, should communicate effectively with parents to ensure that expectations are aligned and that difficulties associated with transfers are addressed early on.

## 5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

1. The study is limited to the city centres of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Future research could expand the sample to include rural districts to provide a more comprehensive view of student transfer patterns across the KRI.
2. Future studies can focus specifically on transfers from public to private schools or vice versa to better understand the unique consequences of each type.
3. The number of interviewed parents was limited due to time constraints and administrative issues. Future research could consider larger-scale surveys and possibly include student voices to gain first-hand perspectives and to discover more about their experiences and coping mechanisms.
4. This study did not address the administrative challenges faced by school principals in accommodating transfer students. Future research could include **school principals** as participants to explore this important dimension.

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