
Obstacles Influencing the Speaking Skills of ESL Low-Proficiency Undergraduates in Pakistan

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Abstract

The research investigated obstacles to the speaking skills of low-proficiency ESL undergraduates, such as the classroom environment, the use of English as a second language, and students' low participation at the University of Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The study aims to identify the emerging reasons for the low speaking proficiency of ESL learners. The target population for this study comprised students from the department of English at the University of Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. A qualitative approach with a case study research design was employed in this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. The data was collected from fifteen low-proficiency ESL undergraduates through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative study employed thematic analysis to identify the reasons for participants' low proficiency in speaking skills. Based on the results of the study, it was concluded that social, linguistic, and psychological factors influenced the speaking skills of low-proficiency ESL learners. This study is expected to be beneficial for students, academicians, and policy-makers.

Keywords: Speaking Skills, English Language in Pakistan, Obstacles, English Second Language, Undergraduate learners.

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العقبات المؤثرة في مهارات التحدث لدى طلبة مرحلة البكالوريوس المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية في باكستان

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في العوائق التي تحد من تنمية مهارات التحدث لدى طلبة مرحلة البكالوريوس ذوي الكفاءة المنخفضة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية في جامعة كوتلي آزاد جامو وكشمير. اعتمد البحث المنهج النوعي بتصميم دراسة حالة، واختيرت عينة قصدية مكونة من خمسة عشر طالباً. جُمعت البيانات من خلال مقابلات شبه مهيكلة، وحُللت باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي. أظهرت النتائج أن العوامل الاجتماعية واللغوية والنفسية تشكل أبرز أسباب ضعف الكفاءة الشفوية لدى الطلبة. وتبرز أهمية هذه الدراسة في تقديم معطيات يمكن أن يستفيد منها الطلبة والأكاديميون وصانعو السياسات التعليمية.

كلمات مفتاحية: مهارات التحدث، اللغة الإنجليزية في باكستان، العوائق، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية، طلبة مرحلة البكالوريوس.

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1.Introduction

The English language is considered an international language of communication, and its acquisition expands employment opportunities, travel possibilities, access to advanced education, and overall quality of life (Akhtar et al., 2020; Chand et al., 2022). Mastery of speaking skills is often used to evaluate learning accomplishment (Hwang et al., 2020). A study by Imran (2020) reports that speaking skills are not given enough importance in Pakistan, which leads to problems in speaking. Some obstacles negatively affecting speaking skills are social, linguistic, and psychological due to several internal and external causes, including the quality of teaching methods, the number of students, time limitation, and the setting of the institution (Buehler et al., 2021; Palma-Gomez et al., 2020). Speaking is defined as an interactive process that comprises the production, transmission, and receipt of information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Undoubtedly, it is the most difficult skill to master when studying English (Sandra, 2022). Speaking is a productive verbal skill that involves the structured development of verbal utterances to communicate with the audience (Nunan, 1999). English has become necessary due to the increasing flow of globalization. People nowadays desire to learn international languages for educational purposes, particularly mastering them to communicate with foreigners and gain future employment (Ramli et al., 2021). English is used as an official language in several countries, including Pakistan (Anila et al., 2023). Speaking is viewed as the most crucial component of practicing the language (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Previous research studies indicate that speaking is the most complicated and difficult language skill (Liu, Lo et al., 2020; Zhang, 2009).

According to Handayani (2018), students struggle with speaking when they lack confidence and practice in class; also, the techniques of the teachers may not be suitable for the students. Pronunciation, grammar, lack of contact, vocabulary, and self-confidence are some of the obstacles ESL students face while learning to speak, which may also hinder their ability to communicate clearly (Putera et al., 2022). Past studies also found that students' abilities were significantly impacted by students' limited opportunities for speaking practice and lack of exposure

to English outside of the classroom, resulting in a deficiency in their speaking proficiency (Toubot, 2018; Zargoun, 2024). Furthermore, the utilization of engaging teaching methods is minimal, and the learning process remains focused on the teacher (Robillos, 2023). Poor oral proficiency makes it difficult for students, particularly those in higher education institutions, to function effectively in the workplace (Ramamurthy et al., 2021).

The monolingual approach has dominated the teaching of English as a second language, which views the target language as the standard and expected reference for students to become proficient like native speakers (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). In educational institutions, monolingual language policies dominate, causing language learning barriers for many learners (Makalela, 2018). The use of students' native languages has been avoided in teaching English because it is believed that these languages may hinder their comprehension and mastery of English language abilities, leading to challenges in speaking skills (Pathan et al., 2014). However, the incorporation of learners' home language in teaching and learning supports learners while acquiring competency in their language of instruction and enhances their knowledge of the subject area, making learning more relevant and authentic (Maruma & Motohaka, 2020; Abraham, 2021).

Pakistan is a multilingual country where people speak a variety of languages (Channa, 2017). Pasto, Balochi, Sindhi, Saraiki, Punjabi, and Urdu are the major languages spoken in the country (Anila et al., 2023). Previously, the government attempted to replace English with Urdu, the country's national language, but was unsuccessful (Channa, 2017). English is the official language of Pakistan, and it is used extensively in almost all government institutions. However, students in Pakistan face many hurdles due to low proficiency in English (Saima et al., 2020). Several studies have identified that the majority of institutions in Pakistan have inadequate teaching approaches, insufficient educator training, and outdated curricula contribute to ineffective language learning outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2018). Learners possess low proficiency in English mostly due to insufficient exposure to its practical use in real-life contexts (Shahzadi, 2018; Pervaiz et al., 2022). However, proficient English speakers can express their views and feelings

according to the social and cultural circumstances (Nosheen et al., 2020). A further obstacle in mastering speaking skills is a linguistic barrier, such as wrong pronunciation, insufficient vocabulary, and inability to comprehend the English language syntax. Pakistani speakers face many problems as the syntax of Urdu and Punjabi is the opposite of English (Gulzar et al., 2018). The preceding description demonstrates that a gap exists in low proficiency ESL undergraduate participation in the classroom, resulting in inadequate proficiency in speaking skills. The researchers discussed numerous studies on education at the university level and presented several ways to address them (Younis, Hussain A., et al,2023; Younis, Hussain A., et al, 2021; Ji, Y., 2024; Younis, Hussain A., et al, 2025).

1. Problem Statement

Substantial research studies have been done on the difficulties Pakistani ESL students encounter in developing their speaking skills, and it has been determined that these difficulties are related to linguistic, psychological, and social factors (Afzal et al., 2022). According to Ali (2020), speaking proficiency is negatively affected by psychological, social, and linguistic issues, among other substantial challenges. Social interaction is essential for communication in English. Like many ESL settings, Pakistani students often have limited opportunities to practice English speaking in the classroom; learners are not provided with sufficient opportunities to develop their language skills in social settings (Iqbal et al., 2023). The findings revealed that most students in Pakistan are timid and more hesitant to speak English effectively, and students do not have proficiency in the English language. They encounter challenges in expressing their thoughts and opinions (Imram, 2020). As a result, learners in Pakistani educational settings experience tension, anxiety, and nervousness during English-speaking (Fareed, Jawed & Awan, 2018; Pervaiz et al., 2022).

2. Research Objective

To investigate the obstacles influencing the speaking skills of low-proficiency ESL undergraduates in Pakistan.

3. Significance of the Study

This study is expected to address the issue of low participation among low-proficiency ESL undergraduates, which is a key hurdle to

acquiring proficiency in speaking skills. This research attempts to investigate low proficiency ESL undergraduate obstacles in speaking skills. The primary purpose of this study is to explore ESL undergraduates' speaking difficulties. Recognizing the importance of improving speaking skills, this study focuses on students who may require more guidance in improving their speaking skills. The current research may contribute to the area of English speaking. It may guide scholars and researchers who wish to support low-proficiency ESL students with speaking obstacles.

4. Obstacles in Speaking Skills

According to several studies, speaking is the most difficult and complex skill to master (Liu, Lo et al., 2020; Sandra, 2022; Zheng, 2009). Shen (2019) finds “the problem of speaking English among English major students consists of two main aspects: linguistic and psychological. Linguistic problems include vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, while psychological problems involve fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, and low motivation. These days, communicating in the English language is a common problem for ESL learners (Raba, 2017). It is challenging to learn English in countries where it is not the official language. The majority of students fail English classes in school or at university due to disparities in L1 and L2, difficult language grammatical patterns, and psychological or attitudinal concerns, causing them to think the topic is particularly complex (Ahmed et al., 2017). Prior studies suggest that traditional methods of teaching foreign languages heavily stress teachers' explanations of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Furthermore, students become weary when traditional teaching approaches are used in the classroom (Amedu & Gudi, 2017; Nasir & Namaziandost, 2019). Problems with the learning environment create a significant speaking challenge for ESL students (Rani, 2020). Certain studies have shown that different conditions impact students' speaking performance, for example, these involve the amount of support, performance quality, and pressure of time (Nation & Newton, 2009).

(a) Psychological Obstacles

Several studies demonstrated that psychological problems, fear of committing mistakes, anxiety, pressure from peers, shyness, and lack of

confidence have a negative impact on the speaking skills of ESL learners (Heriansyah, 2012). Students' fear of making mistakes creates a significant barrier that discourages many students from developing their speaking skills, restricting their career and academic opportunities (Ali et al., 2020; Ding, 2024; Zhang, 2009). The study shows that students' speaking issues are frequently attributed to psychological issues rather than to linguistic. It was shown that learners' anxiety was the biggest barrier to their development in the ESL context (Holandyah et al., 2022). Another study by Ariyani (2018) pointed out that psychological barriers are the primary hurdle in English-speaking classes. Language anxiety, lack of practice, and confidence are key issues that prevent students from performing well in speaking skills (Haidara, 2016). Similarly, Alam & Ashrafuzzaman (2018a) investigated the difficulties ESL students face in developing their speaking skills during classroom participation and found that the most common problems were anxiety, fear of making grammatical mistakes, and lack of focus on the material.

Amoah and Yeboah (2021) conducted a study with seventy-five students at Nanjing Tech University in China. The learners stated that their primary reason for being reluctant to speak out or respond willingly to questions is fear of making mistakes in the English language. On account of this, an unfriendly environment is also one of the obstacles to speaking English inside and outside of the classroom. According to a study by Sato (2003), the majority of Japanese English language learners are extremely proficient writers and readers, but not speakers or listeners. This study examined several common issues that Japanese students encounter while speaking English, including pointless and irrelevant practice, shyness and quietness in the classroom, large class sizes, and speaking anxiety; all of these factors contribute to the poor speaking skills of Japanese ESL students. According to Taun and Main (2015), most students' speaking performance is affected by psychological factors, for example, anxiety, pressure from peers, fear of committing mistakes, and lack of confidence. Such psychological barriers cause fear and reluctance, preventing effective communication.

(b) Social Obstacles

A significant barrier to enhancing speaking skills is a social issue that represents broader societal influence. The main challenge is the

limited use of the English language in both formal and informal settings, particularly in the classroom, and the absence of encouragement for learning English in Pakistani classrooms is another factor (Ali, 2015). Moreover, Sokip (2020) stated that language acquisition skills are inextricably linked to other areas of education, such as the position of the teacher, resources for instruction, and the institution's infrastructure. Certain studies have shown that cultural and societal factors have impact on language acquisition in addition to individual one such as lack of confidence, lack of focus in studying and motivation of students and learning facilities, infrastructure teachers' attitudes impact students capacity and inclination to study second language also, studies pointed out that students, parents, teachers, and the whole community are responsible for speaking problems of the students (Dimayati & Mudjiono, 2010: as cited in Sokip, 2020).

Some researchers argue that students, particularly those from Asia, face difficulties in actively participating in group conversation due to their cultural and family backgrounds (Remedious, Clarke & Hawthorne, 2008; Leatemia Susilo & van Berkel, 2016). According to Mahbob, Abdullah, and Abu Bakar (2012), Similar circumstances have been noticed in Malaysia at the tertiary level, where a student's family background may lead to a lack of confidence and feelings of disappointment while asking group questions. The learning environment and lifestyle of ESL students have a considerable impact on their attitudes towards debating, sharing ideas, and participating in conversation (Leatemia, Susilo & van Berkel, 2016).

Furthermore, Larsari (2011) has identified that he did not have an appropriate environment in the classroom to practice English speaking skills. According to her, EFL learners generally lack access to a helpful language learning setting to practice their target language (p.161). EI Sakka (2016) states that many EFL learners have difficulty explaining their opinions, which reflects both a lack the confidence and a tendency to underestimate their abilities. Many students lack the self-confidence to practice speaking with their lecturers and classmates. Furthermore, learners frequently experience problems when learning English as a new language. For instance, sitting in a classroom surrounded by peers can be extremely scary for someone who has never spoken English. The

research investigated some common Bangladeshi learners' environmental obstacles that prevent students from improving their speaking skills.

(c) Linguistic Obstacles

Linguistic challenges, such as incorrect pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and poor comprehension, represent the key barrier to achieving proficiency in speaking skills. Issues related to pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary also hinder English speaking proficiency, particularly for Urdu speakers in Pakistan, as the syntax of Urdu differs significantly from English syntax (Gulzar, 2018). Learners face numerous barriers, and language remains one of the most difficult. Because of limited exposure to English speakers, they lack the social interaction required for effective communication in English. Furthermore, conventional pedagogical approaches have demonstrated ineffectiveness in cultivating students' interpersonal communication skills (Fang et al., 2022). Raba (2017) stated that one common problem nowadays is that ESL students face difficulty in speaking when speaking skills are demanded; students find it difficult to speak, even though learners have learned this skill for many years. Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018) reported several consistent findings that revealed another barrier to low performance in English-speaking skills is the extensive use of L1 in ELT classrooms and limited exposure to TL. According to another study conducted in Nepal by Chand (2021), students were not accurately pronouncing terms they found difficult to use.

Park and Lee (2005) carried out a significant study investigating the relationship between ESL learners' speaking performance and their levels of anxiety, self-confidence, and language difficulties. The research indicated that learners' speaking performance was adversely impacted by their anxiety. Lee (2009) concluded that these students lack the social context and opportunity to practice speaking English. He stated that students' involvement in the classroom is either minimal or inconsistent. Sinha (2001) has stated that English language classrooms require a limited number of students, as large and crowded classes limit the practice of English speaking in university contexts. Also, he identified that teachers in Bangladesh are not actively teaching English.

In developing countries, learning English plays a crucial role, as learners in non-native English-speaking contexts require consistent

practice, attention, and strong motivation (Pitura, 2021). More specifically, this study analyses Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan, Malaysia, and several other nations as examples to investigate the challenges that ESL learners encounter in improving their speaking skills. Its goal is to investigate the reasons for these challenges and discover the factors that influence them. Particularly, linguistic, social, and psychological hurdles are key obstacles that learners experience in developing speaking skills.

5. Speaking Skills in Pakistan

English holds a significant position in Pakistani society, serving as both an official language and a second language (Abbas, Pervaiz et al., 2018). Pakistan boasts a rich cultural diversity, encompassing a heritage of 72 languages (Fareed, Ashraf & Mushtaq, 2019). Urdu functions as the national language, acting as a common medium for communication (Abbas, Pervaiz et al., 2018). Although English is the second language and the primary medium for academic activities, students often struggle to communicate effectively in English due to their limited exposure to practicing the language (Manan, Dumanig, & David, 2017). Research indicates that the education system in Pakistan places a greater emphasis on reading and writing skills in the English language, while proficiency in speaking and listening is often overlooked (Asghar & Butt, 2018). Teachers tend to rely on simple test scores and frequently do not employ rubrics or criteria to assess students' speaking skills (Diaz, Haider, and Hassan, 2019). Pervaiz et al. (2022) found that in ESL classrooms, instructors typically assess speaking skills only through presentations. According to various studies, teachers pay less attention to this skill and often evaluate students' speaking abilities through activities such as presentations, discussions, debates, interviews, and reading aloud (Shagufta et al., 2023). The use of the English language in Pakistan has rapidly increased, both in government and private colleges. English is taught as a mandatory subject up to the graduation level; however, despite studying the language for more than 15 years, many students from non-elite schools still lack a strong command of basic English skills (Fareed, Khan & Akhtar, 2021). Various studies have highlighted several challenges that Pakistani students face in developing their speaking skills at the university level. These challenges include social, psychological, and linguistic factors (Ali, Khizar, Yaqub, Afzal, & Shahid, 2020).

According to Shamim (2008), English is the language of instruction in Pakistani universities. While students from English-medium schools are typically well-prepared, most Pakistani students attend public vernacular schools, which reflects their low proficiency in English. Additionally, a lack of interest, motivation, and unfavourable environmental factors are the primary reasons for poor English-speaking skills among learners (Alhmadi, 2014; Ali et al., 2019). A lack of participation in language learning has a negative impact on students, particularly in interactive conversations (Nasir & Biria, 2017). Courses are often designed solely for exam purposes, leaving little room for students to practice their speaking skills, even after graduation. As a result, many ESL learners still struggle to communicate effectively in English (Abadi, 2015). Additionally, assessing the four skills of the English language presents challenges due to economic factors, as well as technological and infrastructural limitations (Abbasi & Aftab, 2023).

Teachers face challenges when analysing students' speaking abilities due to limitations in physical space and the necessity of evaluating each student individually. Additionally, many students lack exposure to English in their daily communication. At the university level, the use of English is largely restricted to teaching and learning environments. While speaking proficiency is crucial for teaching English to ESL students, it tends to receive less emphasis in Pakistani ESL classrooms (Ali, 2020). As a result, students often struggle to master English at the university level, making it difficult for them to effectively express their ideas and opinions. Teachers assess students' impromptu speaking and interview skills using a rubric (Abbas, Khan, Chandio, & Javed, 2022). The context of Pakistan influences the use of the local language, particularly in classrooms, which tend to follow a traditional style. This conventional approach prioritizes completing the syllabus over developing speaking skills, often sidelining communication in English. A study by Hassan and Ahmad (2015) highlighted the challenges faced by English language learners, especially those who are disinterested in speaking English. Many of these learners view English simply as an academic subject rather than as a means of communication. The research provides insight into the various difficulties ESL learners encounter while practicing speaking in Pakistan, especially within their social

environment. It emphasizes the necessity of understanding learners' perspectives of the issues they have while speaking, as well as the factors they believe contribute to these difficulties.

6. Methodology

The target population for this study comprised students from the faculty of social science at the University of Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. A qualitative approach with a case study research design was employed in this study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher selects only those individuals who satisfy the study's objective based on the researcher's belief (Obilor, 2023). The present study employs a non-probability sampling technique as it allows only certain individuals from the population to be selected based on predetermined criteria. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. The data were collected from fifteen low-proficiency ESL undergraduates through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative study employed thematic analysis techniques to determine the obstacles in participants' speaking skills. The participants of this study were third-year undergraduates from the department of English who had obtained the lowest grades in the presentation and communication skills course. The study focused on fifteen students, comprising ten females and five males. Semi-structured interviews allowed interviewees to explain their ideas and enabled the interviewer to investigate emerging issues. Moreover, interview data provide researchers with a thorough understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012). The researcher interviewed fifteen participants with poor speaking fluency who were selected purposively. There are several approaches for developing themes and interpreting qualitative data. The present research employed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), using a reflexive approach to identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. The data was categorized into speaking practice, challenges in speaking, and factors contributing to students' low participation in the ESL classroom.

7. Results and Discussion

Past studies provide credibility with the fact that speaking remains the hardest skill learned by ESL learners in Pakistan. Most of the barriers are psychological, social, and linguistic. The behavioural aspects, like

fear of mistakes, fear with regard to lack of confidence, and anxiety, make students fail to be actively considered in classrooms. Also, Holandyah et al. (2022) stated that learners' anxiety was the biggest barrier to their development in the ESL context. Speaking practice is further shortened by social barriers, such as the lack of possibilities to practice real-life communication in English, and no encouragement from peers and teachers. Another level of difficulty is presented by linguistic problems, including speech disabilities and a low level of vocabulary, and a gap between English grammar and local languages. The current research results emphasize the fact that the existing approaches to teaching Pakistani students are more focused on reading and writing rather than on speaking. The teachers are used to traditional methods, and the interactive and communicative ones are minimally used. Similarly, the results are consistent with the findings of Asghar and Butt (2018) and Shagufta et al. (2023) that Pakistan's formal education system places greater emphasis on English language proficiency in reading and writing, while speaking and listening are given less emphasis in ESL classroom. The inadequate authentic speaking activities both in and out of the classroom result in the low proficiency of oral skills, even after several years of studying English. Likewise, Iqbal et al. (2023) state that Pakistani students often have limited opportunities to practice English speaking in the classroom; learners are not provided with sufficient opportunities to develop their language skills in social settings. With such outcomes, there is an implication of necessary curriculum reforms that focus on speaking skills. Communicative language teaching approaches must be employed by teachers; habitual speaking exercises must be incorporated, and a friendly environment with minimal anxiety should be created. It is also desirable that students, outside the classroom, be able to train English skills in real-life situations. It is also reflected in teacher preparation and new teaching materials as part of designing better speaking teaching. To increase fluency and confidence, the institutions should allow students to have debates, discussions, and presentations. The enhancement of speaking in Pakistan involves collaboration among the teachers, policymakers, and students. Unless barriers are overcome, graduates are likely to be insufficiently proficient

in oral development to succeed in school and acquire new skills in their careers.

8. Conclusion

This research reviewed the obstacles that affect students' speaking performance. Due to these obstacles, students become less comfortable and confident in their speaking skills. The findings of this study highlighted that speaking skills are extremely challenging for students who have low self-esteem, excessive anxiety, and low motivation. Moreover, the study concludes that the main obstacles to developing speaking skills are teacher-centred instruction, the classroom environment, and limited background knowledge of the Second language. These findings are different from the results of the earlier studies examined in this study. Thus, students should have a pleasant and cooperative environment that can help them overcome their obstacles in oral presentation. Based on the review of the literature of the study, teachers should understand their students' interests and feelings to enhance learners' self-confidence, and select the appropriate teaching approach to keep their learners engaged in the speaking activities. Teachers should also know when and how to correct their students' errors to prevent them from fear mistakes.

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