



The Attitude of Pakistani Undergraduates towards Speaking English

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Abstract

The fluency in speaking skills is one of the important skills that determines professional and academic success. Students in Pakistan are eager to learn how to speak better English for many social benefits. To become fluent speakers of English, it is mandatory for the teachers to provide a good number of opportunities to students for improving their English-speaking skills. This study aims to explore the reasons with which students prefer to speak English in different contexts. The factors that encourage or discourage students for adopting English to communicate are also examined. For this purpose, interviews of undergraduate students at a public sector university were conducted. The findings that emerge from this study are that students are motivated to learn English and speak English because it promises several social gains. Additionally, students receive its advantages during studies as it provides them better grades and improved impression in front of teachers and peers. It was concluded that while keeping, strong hold to one's culture, speaking English for better understanding of the world is necessary.

Keywords: Speaking English, undergraduate students, professional and academic success



Introduction

Students' attitudes toward speaking English in Pakistan are influenced by societal variables like status, solidarity, and prestige. This conceptual structure assists in explaining the complex ways that language, society, and culture interact to influence behaviors and mindsets related to language use (Khalid, 2016). English in Pakistan is associated with the ruling elite, and it is considered as the language of dominance and high social status. English enjoys the superior status due to its role in education and development. The speaking competency in English language has remained one of the important skills to achieve success academically and professionally (Ema, 2017). The importance of English language is irrefutable in Pakistan as the concept that English is the language for development has dominated the education sphere of the country (Shamim, 2011).

The significance of English-speaking skills can be judged with the fact that students strive to achieve better fluency and proficiency for an impact in society. Students accept that English speaking is the skill that they should work on. The perception of the students regarding speaking skills is important as they understand that speaking English at gatherings and during the presentations will help them score a better impression publically (Abbas, 1993). Due to ever increasing role of English in various professions, there is an added value attached to education imparted in English where emphasis is laid on speaking competence. English is therefore considered as a pre-requisite to upward social mobility and success. English is used for official purposes and the daily work in main institutions of Pakistan like military, law and legislature, banking and media is carried out in English since it is directly linked with developmental possibilities (Rassool, 2007). The language most dominated in education sector in Pakistan impacts the working culture of different fields. English plays a significant role in education and development of students especially when they are expected to communicate in English in their educational as well as professional capacity. At tertiary level, the proficiency in English language is a mandatory requirement and linked with better academic grades. Additionally, English has been one of the desirable fashion trends in Pakistan especially among educated class where parents demand English in schools (Schiffman, 2003). Such families prefer the use of English instead of their mother tongue in formal gathering. Similarly, they watch English movies or read English newspapers available such as *DAWN*, *THE NEWS* and like to listen to English music.

Moreover, they choose western style of clothing instead of traditional Pakistani dresses (Rahman, 2008). Pakistan is a country where English is used as a medium of instruction and



school, college and university level. There are many private schools, colleges and universities which impact education in English. English thus becomes the medium of instruction in all the educational institutes. This study is conducted to evaluate the attitude of Pakistani undergraduates towards speaking English where a special focus has been given to students' perception. It is claimed that this qualitative study would provide a closer understanding of students' perception about speaking English.

Literature Review

Pakistan is multilingual society where a variety of languages are spoken including Punjabi, Pushto, Saraiki, Sindhi, Kashmiri and Balochi (Abbas, 1993). In addition to regional languages, Urdu and English are the most spoken languages. Pakistan was one of the colonies of Britain and inherited a non-native variety of Indo-Pakistani English. Pakistan as an ex-colony has inherited a massive administrative machinery that function on English language. Despite its key position in bureaucracy and education, the English language teaching in Pakistan has always faced seen shifts and gaps regarding policies and medium of instruction (Javed, 2017). The first and foremost step is to provide equal opportunities to Pakistani students for learning English.

The Pakistani society is concerned with learning and speaking of English especially the upper and middle class who are in favour of learning English for a more western lifestyle (Raza, 2015). The attitude of Pakistani people towards speaking and learning English is very much positive hence building an established culture of preferring English medium instruction over Urdu. The Pakistani society is also driven by instrumental reasons for speaking English as people know their children would not be able to maintain a high-profile career if they are less competent in English. For this reason, they favour an encouraging attitude towards speaking English. People believe that competence of English speaking contributes to personality development, success and enhances personal prestige (Saheb, 2014). For all these reasons, English is taught in many institutes, schools and colleges in Pakistan. It is a compulsory subject till university level provided the medium of instruction in all elite and expensive schools or colleges is English (Rahman, 2010). It is also taught as a vernacular-medium in state-controlled schools that is attended by many children belonging from the low-income groups. Currently, English is the language of elite whereas for all other groups, is a stumbling block. It is also one of the gateways to link the people to the global community. English is a ticket to success and a means to progress nationally and internationally (Shamim, 2011). It is linked with prospects and aspirations that people of Pakistan have for themselves and for



their children. Due to its status in society, students in Pakistan suffer from a considerable level of anxiety and develop a competitive attitude towards English and it is suggested that they should be given greater number of opportunities to learn and practice the language (Hussain, 2018). Pakistani students therefore work harder to achieve a native like competency because there is classification of speakers of English language into two distinct groups i.e. true members – the natives and the others – the non-natives present in the communities strive to achieve native like competency (Liurda, 2009). Students in Pakistan eagerly participate in activities with which they can improve their grammar, vocabulary and especially speaking skills that is considered as a tool for development and success.

The language variety taught and spoken in Pakistan is closer to the Standard English variety, but it is marked with a lot of Urdu-English code switching hence showing the significant role that Urdu plays in forming a Pakistani English, non-native variety (Anwar, 2007). Pakistani students thus adopt a version that is closer to their culture and suitable to a range of situations; they also recognize the benefits of speaking English in future social contexts. Students need English to function academically and professionally, but also to understand the norms set around the world in various other fields like entertainment and gaming (Forsell, 2017). For a better communication in English, it is recommended for students to follow strategies (Wei, 2011) that enhance their speaking competence. One such activity is of online gaming with which students learn their second language - English as it is one of the accessible methods of observing native like English. They also learn the communication style and ways to express them in English. By following several strategies, students can overcome their anxiety that they have for speaking English. One of the causes of students' anxiety that affect their oral performance in English is the fear of interaction with others in the target language especially with the natives (Woodrow, 2006). Students' attitude changes as soon as they learn the required skills and strategies to communicate in English with greater confidence and motivation (Yashima, 2002).

Research Questions

This is an investigative study that focuses on the attitude of Pakistani public sector university students about speaking English. The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors that help Pakistani students decide they should speak English in academic or social contexts?
2. What cultural values Pakistani students compromise on when they speak English?



Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

The present study is in one direction and hence not flawless as it does not include the perceptions of English teachers or policy makers. It has limitations because the students' perceptions are generalized to present an overall opinion. There is a need that further research, to assess students' perceptions about speaking English, be carried out with respect to Pakistan – ESL context. Due to time constraints, the students' perceptions from private universities about speaking English were not considered. The study highlights the insights and opinions of public sector university students only.

Research Methodology

In this study, the interview method has been used to collect and analyse students' attitude towards speaking English. The interviews were conducted by following the semi structured, open-ended questions that were designed in advance. The interviewees were asked seven (07) questions about their perception of speaking English. The questions address the specific aspects of student attitudes towards English such as:

- a. Language, identity and identity
- b. Anxiety
- c. Impression management
- d. Motivation
- e. Teachers' role

The answers were recorded in audiotape, with respondent's permission, and subjected to the thematic analysis.

Sampling Technique

The following study is based on one public sector University in Karachi. The fourteen respondents are completing their undergraduate degree programs in the university and study English as one of the compulsory subjects. The fourteen respondents are students at the same university and their availability within the premises makes it a convenience sampling.

Table 1
Respondent's Details

Respondent's Details				
	Gender	Age	Mother Tongue	Code
Respondent 1	Male	21	Urdu	R1
Respondent 2	Female	22	Urdu	R2



Respondent 3	Female	23	Urdu	R3
Respondent 4	Male	22	Urdu	R4
Respondent 5	Male	25	Urdu	R5
Respondent 6	Female	19	Urdu	R6
Respondent 7	Female	19	Urdu	R7
Respondent 8	Female	24	Urdu	R8
Respondent 9	Female	25	Urdu	R9
Respondent 10	Female	23	Urdu	R10
Respondent 11	Male	24	Urdu	R11
Respondent 12	Male	23	Urdu	R12
Respondent 13	Male	23	Urdu	R13
Respondent 14	Male	22	Urdu	R14

Research Instrument

The current study draws its data from seven interview questions that were focusing precisely on the attitude of Pakistani undergraduates towards English speaking. The questions were, open-ended, and most of the respondents have answered in Urdu or by switching their code from Urdu to English. The respondents were allowed to think about their answers and respond to the questions being asked independently. The questions were shared with the respondents before conducting the formal interview; additionally, the translations of questions in Urdu were also provided during the interview to facilitate the respondents.

Ethical Consideration

Before and after the interview, the researchers of the study informed the participants that their contribution in the study is voluntarily, and they have the right to withdraw at any given moment. Considering the ethical standards, the participants were informed that their names and whereabouts would be kept confidential. The participants signed the informed consent (Appendix A) to allow the researchers involve them in the study. Later, the interview transcriptions were provided to the respondents to check and verify the facts.

Research Procedure

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews of fourteen (14) respondents who are students at a public sector university in Karachi and have been studying English as a compulsory subject.

Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews of fourteen respondents, the data was transcribed and analysed for identifying the emerging themes. The transcriptions were coded, and the following four broad themes were developed:



- a. Students' attitude for retaining their Culture and Identity while speaking English.
- b. The Role of Teachers in Building Speaking Competence
- c. Students' Motivation to Learn and Speak English
- d. Students' anxiety while speaking English.

Thematic Analysis

Table 2

Main findings (themes/sub themes) in the summarized manner:

Theme/sub-theme	Key Findings
1 - Speaking English does not change the Pakistani Identity	- Students recognize the global importance of English but emphasize the importance of their cultural identity. - English proficiency is seen as a skill rather than a means to change cultural practices. - Code-switching between English and Urdu is common to maintain cultural authenticity.
2 - Positive Attitude towards Speaking English	- English proficiency is exercised when necessary but does not alter lifestyle or cultural identity. - Some acknowledge a potential influence of English on lifestyle and outlook, especially among certain social groups.
3 - Teachers' and Parents' Influence on Students' attitude towards Speaking English	- Teachers and parents play a significant role in encouraging students to learn and speak English. - Presentation skills are particularly emphasized by teachers to enhance oral proficiency. - Supportive environment from teachers and peers boosts students' confidence in English speaking.
Code-Switching and Speaking Skills	Many students exhibit nervousness and lack of fluency in speaking English. - Code-switching between English and Urdu is a prevalent strategy to overcome language barriers and convey messages effectively. - Teachers play a crucial role in helping students navigate language challenges and improve communication skills.
4 - Speaking English provides social gains/prestige	English proficiency is perceived as essential for social and professional success. - Speaking English enhances social status and opportunities for advancement in society. - English proficiency is viewed as a symbol of education and intellect, leading to admiration and respect from peers.
5 - Instrumental Reasons for speaking English	- English proficiency is associated with greater knowledge and social impression. - Speaking English is seen to achieve academic excellence and professional growth. - English proficiency



	influences societal perception and opportunities for advancement.
6 - Students' anxiety while speaking English	- Many students experience anxiety and nervousness when speaking English, especially in public settings. - Fear of negative feedback and embarrassment inhibits students' confidence in speaking English. - Public speaking situations often lead to self-consciousness and hesitancy among students.
7 - A Negative Side to Speaking of English	- English proficiency is highly valued in Pakistani society, sometimes overshadowing other forms of knowledge and expertise. - Speaking English is often equated with educational qualifications and social status. - English proficiency can lead to increased social prestige and attraction. - Some students express concerns about the societal emphasis on English proficiency, highlighting its potential to undervalue other skills and attributes.

Theme 1

Speaking English does not change the Pakistani Identity

Most of the respondents are sensitive to the fact that English is one of the necessities to survive yet it should not change their culture and ideology. One of the respondents said:

“... even if I know English very well, I will say salam, and not hello because for me it is only a language, it is only a skill...” (R2)

Likewise, one other respondent has stated that:

“...if someone says Happy Eid. It come a little odd and instead more decorum is Eid Mubarak, as we say in Pakistan Eid Mubarak is national. It is understood in Karachi and all the way to Gilgil Baltistan across all ethnicities in Pakistan so there are certain cultural and religious environment in speaking English becomes a hindrance...” (R3)

“...yes, If I am in a religious gathering where there is a very learned Islamic scholar giving speech or lecture then I would probably not try to speak English, not because of any preconceived notion but because the population that usually attends these are not familiar with the language...” (R3). Students recognize that learning and knowing English is a

demand that they must fulfil to meet the global standards, but their own language is Urdu:

“... we know how to speak English. we speak urdu in our home. our language is urdu, but we know English because it is a social demand. No, I don't exchange my cultural norms...” (R4).



Theme 2

Positive Attitude towards Speaking English

Respondents are sensitive to the situation and circumstances where they must speak English or not because they exercise their competence in English only when it is needed:

“... yes, when our servant is in the house, we don't speak English. we rather give her instructions in Urdu, and she understands Urdu. we cannot say cook the meal or iron the shirt because she could not understand it. we must give her instructions in Urdu and the circumstances are such that we must speak Urdu. so, in domestic environment, we prefer Urdu...” (R4).

“...no no, I don't think it changes, because it is just a language, and our culture cannot be changed by speaking English only. we speak English when we speak shalwar kameez so we are same, and I can wear jeans and speak in Urdu, but I am the same person...” (R6).

“... No, I do not think so. English is just a language, and it does not influence my way of living and culture...” (R7)

Some of the respondents, however, maintained the stance that with English, there are people who change their lifestyle too and adopt a modern way of living:

“...it does that people speaking English change their outlook and way of life...” (R8)

and:

“...Yes, the change happens. Especially in Pakistan, if a person is speaking English than they are obviously from a different cultural background like modern families or upper social status...” (R9).

Theme 3

Teachers' and Parents' Influence on Students' attitude towards Speaking English

Most respondents are encouraged to give their presentations in English too thus showing that teachers have facilitated them in their journey to enhance oral skills:

“...My teachers in a language learning program really encouraged me to learn the language better...” (R10)

and:

“... A person who can encourage you and have always encouraged you is one's teacher...” (R14).

“..., my teachers encourage me to speak in English, to use it in presentation, and to use it the class...” (R6).

Another respondent has said that “...No, there is no discouragement in speaking English. Rather everyone is very supportive to learn and speak English...” (R4).



Code-Switching and Speaking Skills

Switching codes from English to Urdu and vice versa is the strategy that is most workable because it saves students from embarrassment while speaking English and they can convey their message by using Urdu words in English structures (syntax):

“...I tell you personally, then my English is not very good, so I take pauses, long pauses, and then I am speaking English, but I mix it with Urdu, so I feel nervous, 70% times I am nervous.

I still want to learn, and I can follow the conversation in English...” (R1)

“...because sometimes I feel I don’t have much vocabulary of English language. If I don’t have the rights words, then I turn into Urdu sometimes, in some sentences...” (R5)

Due to its official status, English language has become a compulsory practice for the people of Pakistan. Students would adopt words and phrases of English and use it with Urdu as per their convenience:

“...I don’t think I have ever felt nervous in speaking English. I am better when I can continuously switch between Urdu and English but not fluent when speaking English for an extended period...” (R8).

Another student has identified the bilingual nature of messages by saying:

“...I choose to speak Urdu because I can explain myself better in Urdu, so I do not consciously speak English in such scenarios...” (R10).

“..., if audience is of that opinion that English to be spoken then we don’t have to use Urdu, but if audience is mixed so I try to keep it Urdu or bilingual...” (R2).

Theme 4

Speaking English provides social gains/prestige.

Students display a positive attitude towards speaking English because it is a way to interact with the world and excel professionally:

“...This is a way for development in any way of upgrade in the society. After the education or during the education, if we use English to learn to speak it is better for us, we get much better opportunities or positions and in society and in professional life...” (R5).

“..., they feel very proud that our colleague or friend is speaking English, and they feel they are upgraded in the society...” (R5).

“...they are impressed, and they are willing to take my help in terms of, if they need to improve their English, they know that there is someone in the class that they should go to, and she will help them for sure regarding English...” (R4)



Theme 5

Instrumental Reasons for speaking English.

“They think that I am coming from a big family. They ask me are you from Cambridge background. They think that I am from a better social class. They think that I have O levels and A levels. They think that I am from defence or Clifton area” (R6).

Respondents believe that with English comes greater knowledge and impression socially therefore it is a mandatory too to acquire. One of the respondents said, “When I speak English, people think that I am educated, and they are impressed” (R11). People in Pakistan have a strong affiliation with English because “People admire English language here and perceive the one who is speaking English as being educated (R9). English thus creates the impression that the person who can speak it is an intellectual and possess greater knowledge as one of the respondents has said:

“...I could present the same idea in my native tongue which is Urdu, and it would not have the same impact on the people that I am talking to and when I say the same thing in English than of course there is a much more aura of being intellectual and from the people I am talking to...”

Theme 6

Students’ anxiety while speaking English.

Students have expressed their reservation about speaking English publically as they fear that they would receive a negative remark from listeners:

“...I get comments like, to summarize people say things like British have left but left their offspring in the form of the person who is speaking English, these are the most common negative ones...” (R3). Students are conscious of expressing ideas in fluent English because the negative feedback causes embarrassment for them in social gatherings. Another respondent said: “Sometimes I feel afraid or scared at various times and that plays into my decision to speak English or not.”

“...Last semester when giving a presentation in a compulsory English course, I felt very nervous. I managed to give the presentation, but I was afraid that someone would make fun of my English language and although I was prepared but even then, I felt nervous because of the hesitancy...” (R10).

“...when I am exposed to a gathering who is pointing out mistakes. Once I was participating in a conference in NED, some people were laughing at my mispronunciation...” (R14)



Theme 7

A Negative Side to Speaking of English

Students believe that we value speaking of English more than the knowledge and information that a person may have. One of the respondents expressed his thoughts by saying that “English language - it is only a skill” (R2).

“...In our society, we have made English in to such a status that those who do not speak English are considered less educated, this is strange, I personally know many people who don't know that good of English, but they did great in their lives, I have my teachers who were not fluent in English, but they had good positions in life. English is just a language...” (R2).

“...Over here in Karachi, in Pakistan it is trend now that if I speak English then I am something, otherwise there is not value for a person, irrespective the background of the person is of Masters or PHD but if he not good in English then he is taken for granted. If a matric pass speaks English, then people take him as a qualified and deserving, so it has become a trend now...” (R2).

But on the other hand, English is the determining factor for many as adds prestige to their lifestyle. A respondent has reportedly said that “...Yes. I preferably see some change in my life that whenever I speak in English, no matter whatever I say in English, it increases my personality and people get attracted to my speaking English...” (R12).

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The study was helpful to explore the perceptions students have for speaking English and the reasons that motivate them to improve their communication skills. The qualitative findings highlighted that university students recognize the importance of English as an international language. They also identify that the need English speaking skills for excelling in their careers and in academics. Previously, studies have been conducted to analyse the notion of Urdu-English code switching and the use of English in Pakistan as a non-native variety (Anwar, 2007). Anwar suggests that the changes present in Pakistani English are the signs of bilingualism and multilingualism present in the region.

English speaking in Pakistan is equated with knowledge and talent. Pakistanis strive to receive quality education in English and have intrinsic and extrinsic motivated to learn English (Saheb, 2014). They identified English language as a skill which may not be used to grade an individuals' true potential. The trend that English teachers play a vital role is has



also emerged since students have acknowledged their teachers as true facilitators of language. Most of the respondents have stressed the need that speaking English is mandatory for education and profession. The ideology that exists in Pakistan about English language promises a better future and accessibility to the world thus recognizing it as a de facto language of development (Shamim, 2011).

Recommendations based on the Findings.

The findings of this study reveal that speaking skills are necessary for students of Pakistan to grow professionally and academically. Other than the instrumental benefits, speaking English upgrade social status of Pakistanis. Students at Pakistani universities aim to excel in English speaking skills because it creates an educated impression. One of the recommendations would be to provide greater opportunities of speaking English and presentation skills embedded in university curriculum.

Another result that can be drawn from the study is that bilingualism is the growing phenomenon in Pakistan. Eleven out of fourteen respondents have spoken in Urdu during the interviews conducted by the researchers provided they all conveniently code-switched from Urdu to English and vice versa. Students' identity the role and importance of English but would remain steadfast to their culture and language; communication in Urdu with phrases of English is the practice among students. Students generally lack confidence and the required proficiency required for speaking English.

The role of teachers has been highlighted as facilitators who help students learn English. The teachers however need to provide opportunities to build communicative competence among students. They are expected to provide exposure and practice sessions to students where they can communicate in English to perform real life functions. To create a more communicative classroom, the teachers should include the following activities to help students improve as English language speakers:

- a. Role-playing
- b. Group discussions.
- c. Online language learning platforms
- d. Presentation skills
- e. Practice sessions.
- f. Targeted feedback



Moreover, exclusive courses based on English speaking skills should be introduced at university level that would help the students overcome the anxiety and nervousness. In the light of this study, it is recommended for the teachers to modify their classroom teaching practices for specifically accommodating English speaking.

Conclusion

This research investigated the perception of undergraduates towards speaking English and reasons that motivate them acquire communicative competence. The study was useful to determine the factor(s) that encourage or discourage students to speak English. The study also examines the role of cultural norms that may or may not hinder students' choice to speak English in different settings. The following conclusions can be drawn from the study:

- a. English in Pakistan is considered as an essential requirement for professional growth and stronger social standing.
- b. Students are motivated to learn and excel in English speaking for instrumental/academic benefits such as a better impression or a more educated outlook.
- c. The teachers of English are helpful in building language awareness among students. Most of the teachers have recognized their teachers as the source of encouragement.

Additionally, the tendency of using Urdu and English language for everyday communication was a yet another finding that most students perform for conveying their ideas across. The reasons of bilingualism in urban areas like Karachi can be further explored.

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