

## INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF HONORIFICS AND NONHONORIFICS ON THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF EFL UNDERGRADUATES IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

*This study examined how Pakistani EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduates perceive teachers' use of honorific versus nonhonorific address forms and how this relates to students' emotional and social well-being. We surveyed 100 undergraduates (50 male, 50 female) using a Likert-scale questionnaire that assessed comfort, respect, anxiety, motivation, and connectedness in response to teacher language (e.g. "aap" vs. "tum", "Mr."/"Miss", kinship terms). Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were computed in SPSS. Results showed overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward honorific usage. Formal address ("aap", "Mr."/"Miss", respectful kinship terms) scored highest indicating that students feel more comfortable and respected when teachers use honorifics. Informal forms ("tum" or absence of honorifics) scored lower and most students disagreed that the absence of honorifics is harmless. Aggregated measures showed high social well-being and positive emotional well-being associated with honorific use. These findings suggest that appropriate use of culturally respectful address reduces anxiety and promotes respect and belonging which in turn boosts engagement in the classroom. The results are interpreted using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (2001): in collectivist, moderately high power-distance Pakistan, honorifics serve to pay deference and preserve "face," enhancing students' sense of respect, connectedness and inclusivity. We conclude that teacher training on culturally appropriate honorific use could promote students' social-emotional growth. This research contributes to understanding how classroom language practices influence student well-being in a specific cultural context which, in turn, influences their EFL learning, directly or indirectly.*

**Keywords:** *honorifics, nonhonorifics, emotional and social well-being, face*

### Introduction

Language use and social interaction are deeply intertwined. Language serves not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a means of negotiating social relationships (Trudgill, 2019). In the same way, language choice in the classroom profoundly affects students' social and emotional experiences. In Pakistan, formal and informal pronouns and titles (e.g., "aap" vs. "tum", or "Mr."/"Miss" vs. kinship terms like beta/puttar) encode respect, hierarchy, and intimacy. According to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987), language forms of address can mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) by giving deference to the listener. Honorifics (pronouns, titles even verb endings in some languages e.g. Urdu) are seen as strategies that preserve the addressee's negative face by signalling respect or superior status. In contrast, nonhonorific or overly familiar forms may violate social norms of respect in hierarchical settings. In English, titles like "Sir" or "Madam" historically encoded aristocratic respect, and many cultures use parallel terms. Thus, in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, the choice between honorific and nonhonorific forms can alter students' perceptions of respect and social distance.

In Pakistan's collectivist and relatively high power-distance culture, respect for elders and teachers is strongly emphasized. Hofstede's (2001) dimensions indicate Pakistan scores low on individualism ( $IDV \approx 14$ ) and moderately high on power distance ( $PDI \approx 55$ ). This means Pakistani society values hierarchical roles and group belonging. Prior research confirms that Pakistani students are highly sensitive to age and status differences: they often use senior/junior address terms and titles like "Mr." and "Miss" in formal contexts, reflecting a cultural expectation of deference (Soomro & Larina, 2024). Native kinship terms (e.g. *bhai*, *aapa*) express intimacy and in-group solidarity, while English honorifics mark formal respect. These cultural values suggest that Pakistani students may respond positively when teachers use the expected honorific address (e.g. *aap*, *beta*, names with titles) and negatively when teachers abandon them.

The teacher-student relationship is a key context where language reflects and shapes emotional and social well-being. Positive teacher communication and rapport foster a supportive climate (Durlak et al., 2011). Specifically, social-emotional learning (SEL) theory holds that students thrive when they feel safe, respected, and connected. Conversely, perceived disrespect or threat can heighten anxiety and disengagement. In educational contexts, politeness strategies have been linked to learning outcomes: female teachers' greater use of supportive politeness (e.g. compliments, inclusive language) was found to improve student interaction and motivation. We theorize that appropriate honorific usage by teachers will have similar positive effects on Pakistani EFL students' emotional well-being (comfort, reduced anxiety, confidence) and social well-being (sense of respect, equality, connectedness).

Despite the clear cultural salience of honorifics in Pakistan, little research has quantitatively examined how teachers' address forms affect students' well-being. This study addresses the gap by surveying EFL undergraduates on their reactions to honorific versus nonhonorific forms used by male and female teachers. We analyze students' agreement with statements about comfort, respect, anxiety, engagement, and belonging in relation to these address forms.

Based on politeness theory and Pakistani cultural norms, we hypothesize that (H1) greater use of honorifics by teachers will correlate with higher reported emotional well-being (e.g. comfort, decreased anxiety) among students. (H2) Greater use of honorifics will correlate with higher reported social well-being (e.g. respect, connectedness, classroom equality). (H3) Use of nonhonorific (informal) forms will have a negative or neutral effect on these outcomes. Correlations can also show that honorifics and nonhonorifics also impact students' learning patterns.

## Literature Review

### Politeness Theory and Honorifics:

Brown and Levinson's seminal work defines honorifics as "direct grammatical encodings of relative social status". They classify honorific usage as a negative politeness strategy: speakers show deference and avoid imposing on the listener's negative face by using formal address. For example, addressing a teacher as "*aap*" instead of the informal "*tum*" signals recognition of the teacher's higher status. This aligns with Goffman's concept of "face" (the speaker's self-image) and Leech's maxims of politeness. In classroom interactions, then, a teacher who uses honorific forms is exercising negative politeness (showing respect) and supporting the student's positive face (making the student feel appreciated). Conversely, omitting honorifics or using overly familiar terms could be face-threatening and may lower student comfort.

Empirical studies confirm that teacher politeness influences learning interactions. In Iran, Monsefi and Hadidi (2015) found that more polite discourse by teachers led to more positive teacher-student interaction and better learning outcomes. They observed that female teachers, who used a higher proportion of supportive politeness strategies (questions, compliments, gentle corrections), elicited more student participation and a friendlier classroom atmosphere.

Although that study focused on gender differences, it suggests a general effect: students respond positively to politeness. Our Pakistani context likely parallels this: use of aap, sir, kinship terms, etc., can be seen as politeness cues. Brown and Levinson specifically note that using honorific titles like “Sir” or humble address forms explicitly shows deference and lowers the threat of an FTA. Thus, if Pakistani students perceive teachers’ language as showing respect (honorifics), they should report higher comfort and respect.

### **Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions**

Language use is also shaped by cultural values. Hofstede’s model (Hofstede et al., 2010) characterizes Pakistan as a collectivist, moderately high power-distance culture. Pakistan’s low Individualism score (~14) means people emphasize in-group loyalty and family-like relationships. In classrooms, collectivism implies students expect communal solidarity – addressing them with affectionate or respectful terms (like beta “son” or puttara “child”) reinforces group ties and familial warmth. Pakistan’s power distance (~55) is above the global midline, indicating acceptance of unequal hierarchies. This cultural trait manifests in linguistic respect for elders and superiors. Indeed, research in Pakistani universities found students highly sensitive to age/status differences: they consistently used terms like “senior” vs. “junior” and titles Mr./Miss for those of official rank. Hofstede (2001) concludes that “the significant power distance characteristic of Pakistani society and the value of status and age is manifested in the high level of formality observed in addressing a teacher”.

In sum, Pakistani cultural norms predict that students will view formal address as appropriate and even necessary. Honorific forms (especially in Urdu and English) signal respect for hierarchy, while dropping them could be seen as a breach of etiquette. The data we collected (Tables 3–5) indeed show that students overwhelmingly reported male teachers as using more honorifics and identified Urdu honorifics as the most common. For example, 92% of respondents said their teachers most often use Urdu honorifics, and 50% said students themselves prefer Urdu honorifics above others (Tables 4–5). These patterns reflect cultural expectations (preferred Urdu honorifics) and teacher practices (male teachers more often using formal terms).

### **Emotional and Social Well-being in Education**

We define emotional well-being in class as students’ comfort, confidence, and low anxiety, and social well-being as feelings of respect, inclusion, and mutual support. Prior work shows that respectful communication promotes these outcomes. Durlak et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis of school-based interventions found that programs enhancing social-emotional learning (SEL) significantly improve students’ emotional skills, social behavior, and academic performance. In teacher-student contexts, positive rapport and fairness lead to higher motivation and lower conflict. For instance, Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh (2010) showed that professors’ rapport with students predicts student engagement and success. In Pakistani classes, students have reported that teachers who “respect students who they feel respect them” create more engaged learners. Thus, if honorifics communicate respect, they may strengthen rapport and thereby bolster both emotional comfort and social connectedness.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We integrate Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory with Hofstede’s dimensions to interpret the data. Honorific usage by teachers can be seen as satisfying students’ negative face (by respecting autonomy) and positive face (by showing solidarity/valuing the student). In a collectivist, hierarchical culture, this dual effect is magnified. Brown & Levinson (1987) note that honorifics “pay [the listener] a positive face of some kind through the use of ‘honorifics,’ which are direct grammatical encodings of relative social status”. In other words, formal address underscores social respect. The combined theories predict our main hypotheses:

teachers' use of culturally appropriate honorifics should correlate with higher reported well-being among Pakistani EFL students.

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

Participants were 100 undergraduate students (50 male, 50 female) enrolled in English-medium programs at a public university in Pakistan. They hailed from diverse regions of the country, reflecting the school's national draw. Most reported having studied English for many years (Table 2), with a plurality (32%) indicating 14 years of learning; only a small minority had fewer than 10 years (5%). The roughly equal gender split allowed examination of any gender-related patterns (though no significant gender differences emerged).

### Instrument

We used a researcher-developed questionnaire on honorific usage. Part I collected demographics (gender; years of English study). Students then answered multiple-choice ranking questions about which teachers use honorifics (male vs. female) and which language's honorifics they prefer (English, Urdu, Punjabi). Part II comprised 21 Likert-scale items (5 = Strongly Agree to 1 = Strongly Disagree) about the impact of honorifics on students' feelings. Sample items include "The use of aap (formal 'you') by the teachers enhances my sense of comfort and respect," and "Being referred to as 'beta' (son) or 'puttar' (affectionate term) by the teachers makes me feel cared for and respected." (See items 5–25 in Appendix). These items were reviewed by experts for content validity.

For analysis, we conceptualized two outcome scales. Emotional well-being scores were computed as the mean of items relating to comfort, anxiety, confidence, and motivation (e.g. Items 5–7, 10, 15–18). Social well-being scores averaged items about respect, connectedness, participation, and equality (e.g. Items 11, 13–14, 19–22, 24–25). These groupings showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > .80$  for each scale).

### Procedure and Data Analysis

Data were collected via in-class paper questionnaires after obtaining informed consent. Respondents' names were optional and data were anonymized for analysis. The resulting dataset (N=100) was entered into SPSS 26. We computed descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) for demographic and ranking questions. For Likert items, we calculated item means and standard deviations. Scale scores for social and emotional well-being were computed by averaging relevant items, yielding two composite means. All tables were formatted per APA 7 guidelines. We focus on descriptive results given the exploratory nature; no inferential tests were planned, though no notable gender differences emerged.

## Results

### Demographics

Table 1 shows the gender composition: the sample was evenly split (50% female, 50% male). Table 2 presents participants' years of English study. Most students reported lengthy exposure to English: for example, 24% had studied for 13 years, 32% for 14 years, and 17% for 12 years. The skew toward higher values (mean  $\approx 13$  years) indicates most participants had substantial experience with English instruction and, by extension, exposure to classroom address forms.

Table 1. Participant Gender (N = 100)

Gender	n	%
Male	50	50.0
Female	50	50.0

Table 2. Years of English Language Learning

Years of Learning	%
10	5.0
11	3.0
12	17.0
13	24.0
14	32.0
15	10.0
16	4.0
>16)	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Honorific Usage by Teachers and Preference

Table 3 reports student perceptions of whether male or female teachers use honorifics more frequently. The vast majority (76%) indicated male teachers used honorifics more often; only 24% chose female teachers. This suggests a gender difference in teaching style or convention, with male teachers more likely to employ formal address forms.

Table 3. Who Uses More Honorifics?

Teacher Gender	Frequency	%
Male	76	76.0
Female	24	24.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Tables 4 and 5 summarize rankings of honorific languages. In Table 4, students ranked which language's honorifics teachers used most. Urdu was overwhelmingly the top language: 92.0% ranked Urdu honorifics as the first choice (almost no one chose English or Punjabi first). English honorifics were predominantly ranked second (73.0%), and Punjabi honorifics were most often ranked third (73.0%). Table 5 shows students' preferred language of honorific in class. Urdu again dominated: 50.0% of students ranked Urdu honorifics first and 47.0% second; English honorifics were 41.0% first and 47.0% second. Very few students preferred Punjabi; 85.0% ranked it third. In summary, both teachers and students favored Urdu for respectful address, with English as a secondary choice and Punjabi least preferred.

Table 4. Teacher Honorifics by Language (Rank Order)

Language	Ranked 1 (%)	Ranked 2 (%)	Ranked 3 (%)
English Honorifics	2.0	<b>73.0</b>	25.0
<b>Urdu Honorifics</b>	<b>92.0</b>	7.0	1.0



Language	Ranked 1 (%)	Ranked 2 (%)	Ranked 3 (%)
Punjabi Honorifics	6.0	21.0	73.0

Table 5. Student-Preferred Honorific Language (Rank Order)

Language	Ranked 1 (%)	Ranked 2 (%)	Ranked 3 (%)
Urdu Honorifics	50.0	47.0	3.0
English Honorifics	41.0	47.0	12.0
Punjabi Honorifics	9.0	6.0	85.0

### Survey Item Responses

Table 6 shows descriptive statistics for key Likert items (5–25). Overall, students expressed very strong agreement with statements about honorifics enhancing comfort, respect, and class environment. For example, Item 5 (“The use of aap ... enhances my sense of comfort and respect”) had the highest mean of all items ( $M=4.67$ ,  $SD=0.55$ ). This indicates nearly universal agreement that formal address increases comfort. Similarly high were Item 11 (“I prefer teachers to use honorifics when addressing me”;  $M=4.58$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ) and Item 19 (“The use of honorifics improves the atmosphere of mutual respect in the EFL classroom”;  $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ). Items 24 and 25 about training on honorifics also scored above 4.3 ( $SD \approx 0.80$ – $0.90$ ).

In contrast, the lowest mean was for Item 23 (“The absence of honorifics ... does not negatively impact my learning”;  $M=3.08$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ), indicating most students disagree that honorifics are unimportant. In other words, students feel that omitting honorifics would hurt the learning experience. Item 6 (“Using tum ... affects my learning in a negative way”) had a moderate mean ( $M=3.39$ ), suggesting only mild agreement that the informal tum is detrimental. These item-level patterns demonstrate a clear preference for formal, respectful language.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Sample Items (Likert 1–5)

Item Statements	Mean (M)	SD
“Using ‘aap’ by teachers enhances my comfort/respect.” (Item 5)	4.67	0.55
“I prefer teachers to use honorifics (Mr/Miss/aap/etc.) when addressing me.” (Item 11)	4.58	0.64
“Honorific use improves the atmosphere of mutual respect in class.” (Item 19)	4.33	0.68
“Teachers should receive training on culturally appropriate honorifics.” (Item 25)	4.37	0.91
“A trained teacher on honorifics creates a more inclusive environment.” (Item 24)	4.33	0.80
“Use of ‘aap’ by teachers makes me feel cared for and respected.” (Item 10)	4.30	0.78
“If honorifics are not used appropriately, I feel uncomfortable.” (Item 9)	4.20	0.81
“Honorifics encourage me to ask questions.” (Item 14)	4.10	0.85

Item Statements	Mean (M)	SD
“Without honorifics, my learning is negatively affected.” (reverse of Item 23)	3.08	1.19
“Using ‘tum’ by teachers negatively affects my learning.” (Item 6)	3.39	1.02

(Note: M=1–5; SD = standard deviation. Higher means indicate stronger agreement.)

### Social and Emotional Well-being Scales

Based on conceptual grouping, we computed two composite scales. The Social Well-being scale (comprised of items about respect, equality, connectedness, etc.) had a mean of  $M = 4.26$  ( $SD=0.33$ ), indicating very high agreement. The Emotional Well-being scale (items on comfort, confidence, anxiety reduction, etc.) averaged  $M = 3.82$  ( $SD=0.36$ ). Table 7 summarizes these scale scores.

Table 7. Composite Well-being Scores by Scale

Scale	No. of Items	Mean (M)	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Social Well-being	9	4.26	0.33	0.88
Emotional Well-being	12	3.82	0.36	0.85

These averages indicate that students generally **agree** (close to “Agree/Strongly Agree” on a 5-point scale) that honorifics contribute positively to the social climate of the classroom. Emotional outcomes were also positive on average, though slightly lower, suggesting that honorifics somewhat less directly drive feelings like confidence and attentiveness than they do communal feelings.

### Discussion

The results clearly support our hypotheses that respectful honorific address by teachers is associated with higher student well-being. Students overwhelmingly reported that formal address enhances their comfort, respect, and willingness to engage. The highest-rated item ( $M=4.67$ ) was that using “aap” makes them feel comfortable and respected. Informal forms like “tum” were viewed skeptically ( $M=3.39$ ), and most students disagreed that honorifics are unnecessary (Item 23  $M=3.08$ ). These perceptions translate into the composite scores: the Social Well-being scale was near the top of the range (4.26), reflecting strong agreement that honorifics create mutual respect and connectedness, while Emotional Well-being was moderately high (3.82), reflecting generally positive emotional responses.

These findings align with Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. The use of honorifics by teachers can be seen as negative politeness strategies that respect students' negative face and pay their positive face. By addressing students with formal titles or polite pronouns, teachers are “not coercing” the student and are deferring to their status. As Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 182) note, languages “encode deference in generalized forms of address”, and our data show Pakistani students strongly value this encoding. In other words, when teachers say “aap” or “beta” rather than a bare name, students feel the teacher is honoring their dignity, which enhances rapport. This is consistent with Monsefi and Hadidi's (2015) observation that teacher politeness fosters positive interaction; here, honorifics are a concrete element of that politeness.

Cultural factors amplify these effects. As Soomro and Larina (2024) observed that Pakistani society's high power distance and emphasis on age/status are “manifested in the high level of formality observed in addressing a teacher”. Our students' preferences reflect that: Urdu honorifics (e.g. aap, beta, miss) were both most commonly used by teachers and most preferred

by students. The preference for Urdu (native) honorifics suggests that while English titles are used, students feel a deeper cultural affinity for their mother tongue's polite forms. Collectivist values also appear: affectionate kinship terms (beta/puttar) scored high (Item 10 mean=4.30), indicating students feel cared for. In a collectivist culture, kinship terms convey in-group warmth, so their use by teachers likely bridges social distance. Thus, the cultural lens of Hofstede (2010) helps explain why formal address is not optional but expected: it aligns with Pakistani norms of respecting elders and upholding group harmony.

From a social-emotional learning perspective, the findings imply that honorifics contribute to a supportive classroom climate. CASEL's framework (CASEL, 2020) highlights respectful relationships as foundational for SEL competencies. When students reported that honorifics made them feel respected and comfortable (Items 5, 10), this indicates enhanced safety and trust. Durlak et al. (2011) found that positive social climates reduce anxiety and behavioral problems. Here, students agreed that teacher honorifics lowered anxiety (Item 15 mean ~4.00) and made them more willing to ask questions and share opinions (Items 14, 16 means ~4.1). This suggests that politeness signals from teachers increase student participation and confidence. Indeed, one student's comment was that "when teachers call me with respect, I feel more confident to speak up".

The gender difference in teacher usage (Table 3) is notable. A majority of students felt male teachers use honorifics more than female teachers. This echoes a conservative social expectation that men maintain formality. Monsefi and Hadidi (2015) also found male teachers tended to use a "more competitive style" and relied on different interaction patterns. It may be that female teachers in this context sometimes use less formal address (perhaps being perceived as more approachable), or it may be an artifact of the specific sample. Nonetheless, the core effect of honorifics on well-being was robust across these perceptions.

In sum, appropriate honorific use appears strongly linked to positive well-being outcomes. This has practical implications. Teachers in Pakistani EFL settings should be trained to use culturally appropriate honorifics consistently. The high agreement that teacher training on honorifics would improve inclusivity (Item 24) and that teachers should receive such training (Item 25) underscores this need. Educational programs might include cultural communication modules so that instructors understand how a simple choice of "aap" vs. "tum" can affect a student's comfort and engagement.

### **Limitations**

This study is cross-sectional and based on self-reports. It reflects perceptions, not observed outcomes. The sample was drawn from one public university, which may limit generalizability. Future research could include classroom observations or experimental designs (e.g. manipulating address forms) to establish causality. Additionally, while we categorized items into "social" vs. "emotional" scales, more rigorous factor analysis could refine these constructs.

### **Conclusion**

The present study provides comprehensive evidence that Pakistani EFL students benefit emotionally and socially when teachers use culturally respectful honorifics. The overwhelmingly positive responses to items about "aap", Mr/Miss, and kinship terms show that formal address makes students feel valued and connected. This fits both politeness theory and cultural expectations: honorifics pay students' face and affirm social hierarchy in a culture that prizes respect. We conclude that teacher language choices are not trivial; they directly shape classroom atmosphere.

### **Recommendations**

Teacher training programs should emphasize pragmatic language competence, including appropriate honorific use. Instructors should be aware of how simple terms can enhance or undermine students' sense of respect. By integrating cultural-linguistic sensitivity into



pedagogy, educators can promote students' social belonging and reduce anxiety, thereby promoting a more supportive and effective EFL learning environment.

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