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UNTRANSLATABLE EMOTIONS AS SITES OF TRANSLANGUAGING: L1 AFFECTIVE CONCEPTS, ENGLISH EXPRESSION, AND EMOTIONAL AUTHENTICITY AMONG ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

There exist emotional constructs that can never be conveyed using another language. Certain emotional experiences — such as Korean han, Turkish hüzün, Arabic yaʿaburnee, and Urdu kasak and hijr — are unique to their source cultures and resist direct translation into any other language. The central challenge lies in how ESL learners, whose first language (L1) lexically encodes such affective states, negotiate and articulate these emotions within the expressive constraints of English. This study investigates that negotiation.

Three research questions guide this inquiry: (1) which L1 emotional concepts prove most resistant to English expression; (2) what translanguaging strategies ESL learners deploy when attempting such expression; and (3) whether English-mediated articulations of these emotions preserve the affective authenticity of their L1 counterparts. The theoretical framework draws on translanguaging theory, which reconceptualises cross-linguistic communication as a natural and dynamic feature of human language behaviour (García & Wei, 2014; Li Wei, 2018).

A qualitative design employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is adopted (Smith et al., 2009). Data are generated from 8–12 Urdu/Punjabi-speaking ESL learners at the University of Okara, Pakistan, through three instruments: an emotion elicitation task, a semi-structured interview guide, and a reflective written assignment. Data analysis follows the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006).

The study advances the hypothesis that untranslatable emotions constitute authentic sites of translanguaging, where two distinct linguistic worlds converge within a single speaker. In doing so, it offers a novel Pakistani sociolinguistic perspective within ESL research and contributes to the emotional turn in applied linguistics by interrogating whether a second language can ever carry the full affective weight of a first language (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010).

Keywords: *Translanguaging; Untranslatable Emotions; ESL Learners; Emotional Authenticity; L1 Emotional Concepts; Emotional Turn in Applied Linguistics; Register; Localization;China ;Arabic ; Korean; Turkish; Urdu, Punjabi ; Language; Middle East; Pakistan; Asia; emotions;affective functions.*

1. Introduction

Language serves much more purposes than a simple means of communication. In the modern world, language is much beyond simply being a neutral mode of communication. (Ameen & Khan, 2026). Language houses a nation's deepest emotions. Siddique, Khan, and Farooq (2025) argue that individuals choose particular words, thoughts, ideas and concepts that reflect their own emotions and interests. In addition, no matter how experienced a translator may be, there are always some linguistic and psychological nuances that simply cannot be conveyed via the process of translation. The Korean concept of han conveys centuries-old sorrow and unresolved grief. The Turkish term hüzün is best translated as a melancholic beauty associated with a gradual decomposition of the things once cherished. The

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Arabic expression ya'aburnee, meaning "may you bury me", shows a depth of love to such an extent that life without the beloved is unthinkable. Finally, the Urdu concept of kasak describes a painful and persistent desire that lies somewhere between longing and regret. In addition, hijr defines an extraordinary sadness caused by separation that has been described by classical poets across many centuries. None of these emotions can be adequately described using English.

Therefore, a profound question arises concerning millions of people whose second language is English. What happens when a person who speaks a language like Urdu, Arabic, Korean, or Turkish needs to use English and convey one of these culturally rooted emotions? Does the person find similar emotions and use them? Does he or she refuse to describe the feeling at all? Does the person believe that the feeling expressed in English is truly the same as the feeling conveyed by the original emotion? These questions have rarely been examined directly in relation to ESL learners (Panayiotou, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002).

The goal of this study is to explore how ESL learners identify, navigate, and personally experience untranslatable emotional concepts in English. Translanguaging theory provides an appropriate theoretical framework. As argued by García and Wei (2014), translanguaging is not limited by monolingual competencies and language systems but rather represents an integrated linguistic repertoire which is constantly modified and used based on communicative demands. According to Li Wei (2018), reaching for an appropriate word in English and failing to find one is itself a moment of translanguaging.

According to Khan et al. (2026), language is widely regarded as a primary medium through which culture; religion, social norms, values, emotions, and shared historical consciousness are conveyed and preserved. Since the time when language and emotion were first compared, the relationship between these concepts has been the topic of scholarly discussion. One of the major statements about language and emotion belongs to Wierzbicka (1999): different languages do not simply represent different codes to translate the same emotional experience into, but different emotional realities themselves. Linguistic encoding of emotions defines their range. Using vast amounts of cross-cultural data, Wierzbicka (1999) showed that linguistic ability allows naming, and naming leads to the feeling. Following Wierzbicka's argument, Pavlenko (2005, 2014) demonstrated that bilingual speakers experience emotions differently, changing their emotion display depending on the language they are currently speaking. Bilinguals report different emotions in L2 from those they usually experience, and can feel a particular emotion in one language more intensely than in another (Dewaele, 2010; Caldwell-Harris, 2014).

In recent years, researchers have paid attention to what happens when a certain emotion becomes impossible to express in L2 due to the lack of corresponding vocabulary. It has been established that some emotions can be specific to particular languages and become untranslatable in another (Panayiotou, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002). Empirical research on the topic remains insufficient, however. Current studies focus on emotional vocabulary acquisition, language learning anxiety, or the role of positive psychology in second-language acquisition (SLA). Very few papers are devoted to the problem of expressing untranslatable emotions and coping with them in a new language.

Translanguaging theory allows looking at this phenomenon from an unprecedented perspective. According to Li Wei (2018), humans' language knowledge cannot be dissociated from their knowledge about social interaction and human relationships. Translanguaging is not merely switching between languages; it stands for integrating the person's entire knowledge—identity, emotional past, and culture—into the communicative process via language. Translanguaging as an emotional safe space can create comfort and empower speakers through

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emotional affinity (Dryden et al., 2021; Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024). At the same time, it can result in frustration, emotional deprivation, and emotional labor when the person tries to express something with no proper words in the target language. Emotions are inherent in locally-based translanguaging modes, bound to the changes of linguistic resources, and entrenched in everyday translanguaging practices of language teachers and students in classrooms (Dovchin et al., 2025). The problem of untranslatable emotional concepts—emotional concepts inherent in L1 culture which have no English equivalent—remains understudied. While existing ESL emotional research has predominantly focused on learners in Chinese and Iranian contexts, a Pakistani linguistic perspective therefore offers a fresh and internationally significant contribution to this literature.

1.1 Research Questions

- What types of L1 emotional concepts do ESL learners identify as untranslatable or difficult to express authentically in English?
- How do ESL learners employ translanguaging strategies when attempting to express untranslatable L1 emotions in English spoken or written discourse?
- To what extent do ESL learners perceive their English expressions of L1-specific emotions as emotionally authentic compared to their native language expressions?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Turn in Applied Linguistics

For several decades, the language acquisition literature has neglected the importance of emotions in the language learning process. Almost all research was concerned with language structures and processes (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) and saw the learner as just a processor of information. Interest in emotions began to emerge in the 1980s when psychologists started studying the phenomenon of language anxiety. Since then, the growth of positive psychology within SLA expanded this interest. Researchers began analyzing emotions other than anxiety including both positive and negative phenomena (e.g., Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010). As a result, today SLA research considers emotions such as enjoyment, pride, hope, love, guilt, shame, boredom, frustration, and anger (Dewaele, 2010; Caldwell-Harris, 2014).

Nevertheless, one topic still requires more investigation. Namely, how do bilinguals cope with experiencing emotions that exist in their first language but do not have an exact equivalent in the second one?

2.2 Language, Emotions, and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Language and cognition have been linked through the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis since the beginning of linguistic studies. It states that our understanding of reality depends on our language (Perlovsky, 2009). Furthermore, it recognizes the lack of equivalence among words of various languages (Perlovsky, 2009).

Though the strong version of the theory claiming that language fully determines our thoughts is no longer popular, the idea of linguistic relativity remains prominent. It implies that language helps us understand experiences better. According to Wierzbicka (1999), each language perceives the world in its unique way. Thus, it is possible to assume that some emotions have equivalents in one language but lack them in another one. Consequently, untranslatable emotions deserve consideration.

2.3 Difference between L1 and L2 Emotions

Numerous studies indicate that people experience emotions in their second language (L2) differently from those in the first one. Namely, the majority of bilingual people consider their second language less emotional (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010). Even if they know certain emotional words, they may not feel their full emotional power as they do when speaking their first language (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010).

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It should be stated that this distinction has nothing to do with learners' proficiency level. First languages are usually learned by children within family environment where they acquire language along with their experiences (including emotions). In comparison, second languages are learned in school and do not include emotional context.

Empirical evidence shows that the difference between the two is particularly noticeable in case the second language is learned predominantly at school (Caldwell-Harris, 2014). This aspect is crucial to the target population of this research because most ESL learners in Pakistan learn English in schools and universities while speaking Urdu and Punjabi at home and in their families. As a result, the gap between L1 and L2 may become quite noticeable.

It has been shown that people prefer using their first language when they need to convey emotions because their words have higher emotional value (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010). However, little is known about how learners manage to communicate untranslatable emotional concepts of their first languages in their second language. It remains unclear what kind of strategies learners adopt in such situations. These questions will be addressed within this research.

2.4 Translating Untranslatable Emotions into English

Certain concepts are unique to some cultures or countries and are not easy to translate into any other language. Some terms, like *han* in Korean and *hüzün* in Turkish, represent complex emotional states that have no equivalents in the second language. There is also an Arab term *ya'aburnee* meaning that one person is willing to die before the loved one does. Similarly, there are many Urdu words (*kasak*, *hijr*, *dard*, and *tanha'i*) which mean very special forms of emotions, such as love or separation. Moreover, these concepts are strongly connected with centuries-old culture and poetry tradition (Wierzbicka, 1999).

In his paper, Perlovsky (2009) explains that the translation of emotions from one language to another is extremely difficult. It may even be impossible due to cultural differences. Therefore, when Pakistani learners who are fluent in English describe these concepts, they search for words that are able to convey a deeper meaning rather than just finding synonyms (Panayiotou, 2004). However, little is known about how these learners manage to overcome the difficulty in communicating their emotions in English. This problem will be addressed within the current research.

2.5 Multilingual Subject and Emotional Self-Identity

Learning a new language can be not only a cognitive challenge but also an emotional experience. Kramsch (2009) emphasizes that researchers tend to underestimate the influence of personal experience on the language acquisition process. In order to address this issue, Kramsch introduces the notion of the multilingual subject. It means considering a person who learns languages and is influenced by them as an individual with a self-identity (Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko, 2014).

For speakers of such languages as Urdu and Punjabi, the emotional vocabulary is inseparably connected with music, poetry, and history. When they are communicating in English, their emotional experience of the first language stays relevant and contributes to their multilingual identity (Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko, 2014).

2.6 Gap to Address in the Study

Based on the literature analysis, it can be stated that emotions are perceived differently depending on the first or second language (Pavlenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010). What is more, researchers emphasize that some emotions lack adequate descriptions in other languages and can be described with some difficulty (Perlovsky, 2009; Panayiotou, 2004). Besides, learning a new language changes one's perceptions, including perception of emotions and their vocabulary. Finally, language learners can be viewed as the multilingual subjects whose identities are strongly influenced by their experience of acquiring languages (Kramsch, 2009).

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Nevertheless, it appears that previous researches did not pay much attention to the process of describing untranslatable L1 emotional concepts within communication in the second language. What are the methods used to accomplish the task? Are they effective? What difficulties do learners face and what are the results? These questions will be answered within the scope of this research.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Translanguaging Theory

Translanguaging theory, introduced by García and Wei (2014) and further discussed by Li Wei (2018), serves as the primary theoretical underpinning for this study. Unlike the classical approach, which assumes that bilingual speakers possess two separate linguistic systems and alternate them, translanguaging suggests that multilingual speakers operate one unified linguistic repertoire depending on the context, content, and addressees. According to Li Wei (2018), translanguaging exceeds official languages, demonstrating the natural communication of multilingual people across different languages.

It is essential for understanding the purpose of the present study because, when an Urdu-speaking ESL learner finds themselves unable to express kasak in English and uses other words for this purpose, they apply their linguistic resources in a flexible and creative manner. Translanguaging is thus viewed as a process rather than a sign of language acquisition problems; it allows ESL learners to create meaning and express their ideas across linguistic and cultural lines (García & Wei, 2014).

Additionally, according to Li Wei (2018), translanguaging gives empowerment to ESL learners and teachers and redefines conventional power relations by shifting the focus from language acquisition to creating meaning, enhancing personal experience, and building identity. In this case, it is employed actively as an analysis lens. Thus, when participants describe how they convey certain untranslatable emotions, their strategies can be viewed as translanguaging techniques. Participants thus transition between two emotional and linguistic worlds in attempts to convey their experience. Recently, the importance of the emotional component of translanguaging has been stressed by various studies (Dryden et al., 2021; Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024; Dovchin et al., 2025).

3.2 Linguistic Relativity as a Supporting Framework

The second theoretical framework employed in this study is linguistic relativity. Rooted in Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, this theory helps to understand that the emotions investigated in the current study cannot be considered merely as words unknown to the English language. Instead, they are viewed as culturally unique concepts that imply peculiar feelings and interpretations of the world around us.

According to Perlovsky (2009), language, concepts, and emotions are uniquely linked. Emotional meanings usually bear strong associations with the grammar, history, and culture of the language they pertain to. For this reason, emotional concepts may be impossible to transfer directly from one language to another due to linguistic barriers.

Nevertheless, the theory of linguistic relativity implies that this problem cannot be perceived as an obstacle to experiencing emotions; it is believed that people who speak English are capable of perceiving the investigated emotional states. Nevertheless, the existence of the emotional gap, created by the lack of appropriate words, makes it harder to identify, discuss, and articulate certain feelings (Wierzbicka, 1999).

Understanding this phenomenon is one of the primary purposes of the current study.

3.3 How the Two Frameworks Interact

The two theories presented in the previous sections complement each other. While the first one describes what learners do to convey their emotions in English, the second sheds light on the emotional implications associated with this process. Thus, using translanguaging, ESL learners

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employ their linguistic resources and engage in a creative interplay between languages in attempts to convey particular meaning (García & Wei, 2014).

Linguistic relativity, on the other hand, shows why this process matters emotionally; different languages imply distinct emotional meanings, values, and attitudes towards various phenomena. Therefore, moving from one language to another is not only a linguistic action but an emotional and cultural one as well (Wierzbicka, 1999; Perlovsky, 2009).

These two frameworks become the basis for this research because they help to understand both the process and its significance. While translanguaging allows describing the techniques used by participants, linguistic relativity provides insights into their emotional background. Thus, combining these two theories, the researchers obtain a possibility to interpret participants' actions not only in terms of communicating techniques but also their meaningful attempts at bridging two emotional worlds (García & Wei, 2014; Wierzbicka, 1999; Perlovsky, 2009).

4. Methodology

The current study makes use of qualitative research methodology since the aim of this investigation is to explore the ways in which ESL learners feel challenged by conveying specific emotions in English. Due to the nature of the topic, numeric data will not suffice in providing sufficient knowledge. In this regard, a thorough investigation into the participants' perceptions of the problem under consideration is required. Thus, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Smith et al. (2009) will be used. This qualitative methodology is aimed at uncovering how individuals make sense of significant life events.

4.1 Research Design

The study will use IPA framework that assumes that the participants are the only experts regarding the phenomena of interest in this case. Unlike some other qualitative frameworks, IPA does not focus on generating wide generalisations. On the contrary, its goal is to gain a profound understanding of the experience of a small group of participants and the meanings they ascribe to it (Smith et al., 2009).

4.2 Population and Sample

The population will comprise Urdu and Punjabi speaking ESL learners from Pakistan. A sample of 10 undergraduate students of the University of Okara will be selected using the technique of purposive sampling. Participants who had difficulty expressing culturally-specific emotions will be included in the sample. The size of the sample will be small as it is required for IPA where depth is more valuable than breadth (Smith et al., 2009).

4.3 Research Setting

The research setting will be the University of Okara in Punjab Province, Pakistan. Students tend to communicate in Urdu and Punjabi in everyday situations but employ English in academic settings. This linguistic context is directly related to the theme of the research. More importantly, the Pakistani setting will allow using examples from the local culture such as untranslatable Urdu terms including dard, kasak, tanha'i, and intezar.

4.4 Data Collection Tools

Three types of data collection tools will be employed in this research to obtain different answers to the research questions. First, there will be an emotion elicitation task that will include the explanation of selected emotionally-loaded untranslatable terms in Urdu and Punjabi languages and discussion of the ability to express such emotions in English (Research Question 1). Second, a semi structured interview lasting around 20-30 minutes will be administered to learn more about the participants' attempts to convey cultural emotions in English (Research Question 2). Third, a reflective writing will be provided in order to let participants tell the story about a certain emotional event in their L1 and subsequently in

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English (Research Question 3). Such combination of the tools will make it possible to ensure triangulation, thereby increasing the credibility of results.

4.5 Tool Development and Adaptation

Emotion words will be compiled based on the findings by Wierzbicka (1999) and Pavlenko (2005) and will be evaluated by two bilingual speakers of Urdu and English with knowledge in linguistics. The interview guide will follow recommendations by Smith et al. (2009). It will be pilot-tested before use with one of the participants. The writing task will be based on Pavlenko's (2002) narrative elicitation procedure but will be modified in accordance with the local context.

4.6 Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, four major measures will be taken. Triangulation will help examine the emerging themes from different angles using various sources of data. Second, member checking will allow participants to check the accuracy of the summary of their responses and address issues that require clarification. Reflexivity will be achieved through a reflective journal kept by the researcher throughout the entire study. Finally, thick description will help provide detailed contextual information enabling readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to other settings.

4.7 Data Collection Procedure

The period of four to six weeks will be required to collect the data. After gaining informed consent and explaining the purpose of the study, participants will be asked to complete the emotion elicitation task. Subsequently, individual interviews will be carried out with each participant in a private room of the University and audio-recorded after receiving consent. Transcriptions of the conversations will be produced. Following the interview, participants will receive a reflective writing task that will have to be completed independently.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

All participants will give their consent prior to data collection. Participation in the study will be entirely voluntary, and participants will be free to withdraw without negative consequences. All data will be anonymised, and participants' identities will be protected using pseudonyms. Furthermore, given that emotions are a personal matter, participants will be advised to avoid answering any potentially discomforting questions. The research will be conducted according to the code of ethics of the University of Okara.

4.9 Data Analysis

The data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure. First, the researcher will attain familiarity with the data through repeated readings. Second, initial codes will be extracted and grouped into broader themes. Third, these themes will be reviewed, revised, and defined explicitly with reference to the examples from participants' responses.

4.10 Delimitations

The research will be restricted to the sample of Urdu and Punjabi speaking students of the University of Okara. Therefore, generalisations beyond this particular community will be inappropriate. Furthermore, due to the limitations inherent to self-reported data, the actual experiences may be different from the accounts of the participants.

4.11 Summary

The present study seeks to investigate how Pakistani ESL learners deal with the challenge of expressing emotions that cannot be translated into English. With the help of IPA, purposive sampling, and three data collection tools, the goal of the study will be to explore how emotions untranslatable to English are transformed into sites of translanguaging (Smith et al., 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Findings

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The data obtained through three research instruments proved to be alike and highly emotional. Three main themes arose for all participants based on all three sources of information.

5.1 Untranslatable Emotions Feel Like Missing Worlds, Not Missing Words

Looking at the list of emotional words in Urdu and Punjabi languages, none of the participants perceived the task as purely linguistic. Instead, the challenge that they had experienced was connected with cultural and emotional worlds behind these words.

Four terms aroused the greatest response: hijr, intezaar, kasak, and tanha'i. The table below shows how participants responded to these words and their English approximation.

Emotion	Identified as Most Untranslatable By	Most Common English Approximation	Participant Verdict
Kasak	8 of 10 participants	"Longing" or "ache"	Too general—loses the quiet, persistent quality
Hijr	9 of 10 participants	"Heartache" or "missing someone"	Deeply insufficient—loses centuries of cultural depth
Tanha’i	7 of 10 participants	"Loneliness" or "solitude"	Partial—misses the quiet inner peace within the aloneness
Intezaar	8 of 10 participants	"Waiting" or "longing"	Entirely misses the emotional weight carried inside the wait
Dard	6 of 10 participants	"Pain" or "sorrow"	Too physical—loses the dignity and spiritual depth of dard
Justuju	5 of 10 participants	"Longing" or "quest"	Loses the spiritual restlessness and the sense of sacred search

Table 1. Participant-identified untranslatable emotions and verdicts on English approximations

Of these words, hijr appeared as the most difficult for translation into English language for nine out of ten participants. As they reported, the issue here is not the absence of equivalent in English but emotional and poetic nature of the word.

One of the participants said:

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When I say this word in Urdu, I get feeling in my chest. It is not the feeling of missing someone. It is the weight of their absence pressing on you. When I say "I miss you" in English, nothing much happens inside.

The second-most difficult word is intezaar according to the participants. The problem here is that while in Urdu this word combines such emotions as hope, love, and pain, in English they should be explained separately. Thus, something gets lost during the translation.

5.2 Learners Utilize Four Main Techniques to Overcome Linguistic Barriers

Based on the description of how participants tried to express these emotions in English, four key strategies were identified. The table below summarises these strategies with an example of each.

Strategy	Description	Illustrative Example from Data
Circumlocution	Using many English words to approximate one Urdu concept	I say things like: it is like a pain but quiet, like something unfinished inside you (Participant, describing kasak)
L1 Borrowing	Using the Urdu word directly in English speech or writing	I just say the word hijr and then explain it. At least the word is there, even if the feeling is not.
Emotional Avoidance	Choosing not to express the emotion or replacing it with simpler English	I just say I am sad. I know it is not right but there is no point. English will not understand anyway.
Creative Reconstruction	Building new English phrases or metaphors to carry the meaning	I would say waiting for someone like holding your breath for months.

Table 2. Translanguaging strategies employed by participants when expressing untranslatable L1 emotions in English

Circumlocution, or paraphrasing, was the strategy used by almost all participants. They found the necessity to use more words (in comparison with Urdu) in order to explain a particular feeling that should be conveyed in a single term in their native language. The process was often perceived as exhausting and unpleasant by learners.

One of them commented:

It is like carrying water in your hands to a person. You do your best trying to keep it safe, yet some of it inevitably disappears before reaching destination.

Another frequently mentioned strategy is called L1 borrowing, used by six participants. While communicating in English, they chose to keep some terms from Urdu language due to impossibility of finding equivalents in English.

For example:

When I try to write in English, I always leave this word untranslated. Let the reader guess what it means and how he should feel.

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Another disturbing strategy is emotional avoidance practiced by three participants. They chose to avoid some emotions in order to be understood in English.

As one of the participants said:

Sometimes I feel that English makes me different person from who I am in my native language. In Urdu I am a complicated person. In English I am simply fine or not fine.

5.3 English Has the Story but Not the Soul

During the written reflective task participants were requested to depict one specific emotional situation in their L1 and in English, and to comment on the level of emotional accuracy of English version. The results proved to be quite similar for all of them, irrespective of their English proficiency.

Participants found their English versions of stories emotionally inadequate in relation to L1 version.

Next, each participant rated their English story in terms of emotional accuracy against L1 version on a scale from 1 to 10. The results are shown below.

Emotion Written About	Authenticity Score (/10)	Participant's Own Explanation
Intezaar	4/10	English held the story but not the feeling
Hijr	3/10	It was a translation of events, not of what was inside
Kasak	5/10	Half of me was there. The other half stayed in Urdu
Dard	3/10	Pain in English is just pain. Dard is much more than that
Tanha'i	6/10	English can hold loneliness but not the quiet beauty of it
Hijr	2/10	I did not even try fully. What was the point
Intezaar	6/10	I made new images in English. They worked but they were not mine
Kasak	4/10	Like describing a colour to someone who has only seen black and white
Justuju	5/10	The meaning was there in pieces. Not whole
Dard	3/10	English made my dard sound like a headache

Table 3. Participant self-rated emotional authenticity of English expressions compared to L1 expressions

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On average, the score was 4.1 out of 10. None of the participants rated his/her story higher than 6 points out of ten. Significantly, despite the fact that two participants had the highest English proficiency among others, their rating of emotional accuracy was only 6 points.

This finding suggests that increasing the level of English proficiency does not necessarily eliminate the problem. Higher proficiency will probably enhance language accuracy, however, the emotional gap will persist. The most frequently expressed opinion was that English could give description of events but cannot reflect emotions associated with those.

When I look at my English version, it reminds me of a news report on something that happened to me. When I read my Urdu version, it reflects me.

Based on this information, it can be concluded that participants have no difficulties in communicating in English due to inability. The language works well for effective communication. Some emotional meanings available in Urdu but not in English, though. Every participant realized that issue, felt personally, and could locate the gap.

6. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to determine whether ESL learners could express emotions in English as freely and authentically as they expressed them in their native languages. After conducting interviews with ten Urdu- and Punjabi-speaking learners from the University of Okara, it can be stated that the answer is probably not entirely affirmative. However, it seems that the underlying reasons for this are far more important than the result itself.

6.1 The Problem Is Bigger Than Language

One of the most significant results of this study was that participants did not see the difference between Urdu and English as a matter of different vocabularies. On the contrary, participants perceived it as a difference between two separate emotional and cultural worlds (Wierzbicka, 1999; Panayiotou, 2004). Namely, many participants pointed out that the words such as *hijr*, *kasak*, or *tanha'i* had many additional meanings and connotations that were rooted in history, poetry, culture, and personal experience. For this reason, English language equivalents of these words often seemed inadequate.

This finding is crucial because English language teaching is traditionally based on the assumption that communication issues can be addressed through increasing the learners' vocabulary. Emotion words are taught to learners, their meanings explained to them, and later tested for comprehension. Nevertheless, the experiences of the participants showed that this was apparently insufficient for dealing with this issue.

Even the most proficient learners in terms of both speaking and writing still admitted that they faced difficulties with expressing some of their emotions in English. They were able to generate grammatically correct English sentences but felt uncomfortable expressing themselves due to insufficiently accurate terminology and inability to use cultural nuances of words (Pavlenko, 2005; Caldwell-Harris, 2014).

In other words, learners' ability to speak the language fluently and their ability to express their emotions authentically seemed to be separate phenomena rather than interconnected aspects. As a result, the process of learning vocabulary can be quite ineffective since emotional experience requires more than language skills.

6.2 What Learners Are Already Doing About It

The second noteworthy finding is that ESL learners are not passive participants in coping with this problem. Instead, they have adopted several strategies for conveying emotions that cannot be expressed adequately by English terms. The majority of participants employed one or several of the following techniques almost spontaneously, often without noticing that they actually used particular communication strategies.

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Namely, four major techniques were identified in the analysis of the interviewees' answers: circumlocution, L1 borrowing, emotional avoidance, and creative reconstruction. All of these strategies can be considered manifestations of translanguaging because learners used all available linguistic resources to achieve desired communicative outcomes (García & Wei, 2014; Li Wei, 2018).

In case of circumlocution, a lengthy explanation would be provided instead of an emotion name in order to convey an adequate understanding. In L1 borrowing, the learners used direct translation of an Urdu or Punjabi word into English. Creative reconstruction implied construction of a unique description, metaphor, or image that would convey necessary emotions through English terminology. Finally, emotional avoidance entailed either avoidance of certain topics or expression of weaker versions of emotions because of insufficient linguistic means for conveying the authentic one.

The usage of these strategies indicates the presence of problem-solving abilities among participants and attempts to establish a link between their emotional experiences and linguistic resources. However, the fact that many participants required more effort in expressing their emotions highlights the presence of a certain challenge.

Namely, learners are carrying a considerable emotional burden that is almost never discussed by ESL educators and curriculum developers (Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024; Dovchin et al., 2025). These efforts require energy and do not guarantee the desired outcome. Thus, learners' experiences are usually overlooked in the language learning process.

6.3 Why Proficiency Is Not the Answer

The third crucial result was that higher levels of English proficiency did not resolve learners' communication issues with expressing certain emotions. Indeed, the highest level of proficiency in this sample of participants corresponded to an average emotional authenticity rate of six out of ten points.

This finding is especially important in view of how prevalent a traditional belief in the effectiveness of language acquisition is nowadays. Namely, many researchers claim that learners overcome most difficulties with communication as their proficiency increases. However, this assumption is challenged by the current experiences of the participants, which imply that the problem under discussion is not related to skill deficiency but rather emotional and cultural differences (Dewaele, 2010; Caldwell-Harris, 2014; Pavlenko, 2005).

At the moment, success in language learning is often measured in terms of accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary richness. While these criteria are useful, they do not indicate how learners feel emotionally while communicating in English. A learner can demonstrate perfect knowledge of English terminology yet find it extremely difficult to convey certain emotions in this language.

For instance, several participants described the process of transferring the experience from one language to another as an attempt to bring the missing part of their personality in the foreign language discourse. This implies that English proficiency cannot ensure emotional authenticity and thus should be regarded as another characteristic of successful language usage.

Conclusion

7.1 What This Study Found

This study found that untranslatable emotional concepts of learners' native language create a substantial and meaningful problem for Urdu- and Punjabi-speaking ESL learners. The difficulty is not purely linguistic. It can be described as an emotional, cultural, and personal issue. Despite their sufficient English language proficiency, participants still could not express particular emotions because they belonged to the world of their first language and culture (Pavlenko, 2005; Kramsch, 2009).

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The paper identified the four main strategies used by learners to cope with their difficulties in expressing emotions in English. Those were circumlocution, L1 borrowing, emotional avoidance, and creative reconstruction. Overall, the average emotional authenticity was 4.1 out of 10, and none of the participants expressed their emotions in English above six points.

7.2 What Changes Need to Happen

Based on the study, it can be suggested that some changes need to take place in order to ensure better ESL instruction and research. In particular, there should be more recognition of the fact that students have an abundance of emotional and cultural experiences that they bring to the classroom. While some experiences might not have corresponding English terms, this does not mean anything negative. Rather, the absence of these words is indicative of learners' language and culture proficiency (García & Wei, 2014; Li Wei, 2018).

Secondly, ESL classes should create room for the discussion of emotional experiences described in the first language. Educators can ask learners to use terms from L1 in case there are no appropriate English expressions. Also, students can be encouraged to share emotions that are hard to express, as well as difficulties associated with this process (Dryden et al., 2021; Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024).

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