

## CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN LEARNING AND USING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

*This research investigates the challenges encountered by rural undergraduate students in mastering English as a second language and using English focusing on 60 BS-level students currently enrolled in universities in Punjab, Pakistan. These students, having completed their secondary education in rural districts such as Faisalabad, Multan, and Bahawalpur, face significant difficulties due to the limitations of their previous rural education system as they transition to university settings like Lahore and Rawalpindi, where English is the primary medium of instruction. Employing a quantitative approach, the research utilized a structured questionnaire, validated through pilot testing, and analyzed data using SPSS with descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, t-test, and regression analysis. The findings reveal the lack of resources, inadequate teachers' training, socioeconomic constraints, and low motivation rooted in their rural schooling profoundly impact their university performance, exacerbating gaps in communicative skills and confidence. The discussion situates these challenges within the context of rural-urban educational disparities, drawing on global parallels while highlighting Punjab-specific cultural attitudes. Recommendations include enhancing rural school resources, improving teacher training, offering community support, integrating culturally relevant content, and establishing university mentorship programs. Despite limitations such as the small sample size and cross-sectional design, the study provides valuable insights for educational policy to support rural-origin students, advocating for further longitudinal research to strengthen these findings.*

**Key Words:** Rural undergraduate students, English as a second language, rural education system, quantitative approach, communicative skills, socioeconomic constraints.

### Introduction

Language is humans' most important and powerful tool. It serves as a vehicle for communication, ideas, and culture, enabling individuals to express emotions, build relationships, and support learning and social development. According to (Holiday, 1978), language creates social order. In multilingual societies like Pakistan, learning additional languages is important, especially English, which symbolizes modernity, power, and social advancement. Once the language of colonial masters, English has become a global language dominating science, technology, business, diplomacy, and higher education. According to (Crystal 2003), there are more than 1.5 billion English speakers worldwide. In Pakistan, English functions as an official and academic language and remains influential in government, education, law, media, and business. As noted by (Rahman, 2002), English acts as a gatekeeper for social privilege and mobility.

English is introduced as a second language in most Pakistani schools; however, disparities exist between urban private and rural public institutions. Rural students often face underqualified teachers, outdated materials, limited exposure, and fewer opportunities to communicate in English. According to (Coleman 2010), English provides opportunities but also creates inequalities. Research shows rural ESL learners struggle with limited exposure, fear of mistakes, lack of trained teachers, and grammar-focused instruction (Mansoor, 2004). Students entering universities often experience difficulties in academic communication and self-confidence. Teacher quality remains central to language outcomes. Although reforms and technology-based learning initiatives exist, rural limitations persist. As argued by (Norton, 2013), language learning also involves identity and social positioning. Rural students must not only learn English at university level but also use it, creating challenges due to limited exposure and sociolinguistic barriers.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- 1-To identify the key language, psychological, social and institutional obstacles that rural students face when trying to learn English
- 2-To understand how these affect the self-esteem and performance of rural students at a tertiary level.
- 3-To understand the differences between rural and urban students' experiences of studying English
- 4-To provide recommendations that could help to address the problems identified and improve English learning for rural children.

### **Research Questions**

- 1-What are the main barriers to rural students' second language learning in English?
- 2-What are the underlying reasons for these challenges?
- 3-How do these challenges affect the success and participation rate of rural students in university?
- 4-What are the differences between rural and urban students' experiences of learning English?

### **Literature review**

#### **1-Socio-Economic Background and Its Impact on Language Learning**

Pakistan is an under-developed nation with most of the population living in rural areas. (2011, Surabaya - Indonesia) highlighted that home background and school factors influence ESL learning. Narendra Rathod (2012), Farooq, Chaudhry, and Shafiq (2011), Arshad, Attari, and Elahi (2012), (Jerrim, 2009), and Department of Education and Training Australia (2010) confirm that socio-economic background affects language learning, while rural-specific problems remain underexplored in Pakistan's higher education system.

#### **2. Linguistic and Educational Obstacles in Learning English**

The obstacle is something that must be worked to be removed. Newell and Simon (1972) define obstacles as something measurable, focusing on learning obstacles in English. Intermediate level English language learning involves reading and writing problems. Learners are disadvantaged due to linguistic and cultural differences. Learning is hindered by low foundational learning, large classes, ineffective teachers, outdated teaching methods, and flawed pedagogy and material design (Abbas 1998). Rural learners remain further disadvantaged due to lack of exposure and support facilities.

#### **3. Language Skills and Sociolinguistic Context**

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are basic language skills whose proficiency differs in socio-linguistic settings. Listening and speaking are challenging; (Celce-Murcia, 2001), while reading is socio-interactive. In Pakistan, multilingualism, preference for mother tongues, lack of English practice and interaction, and limited rural exposure hinder English learning.

#### **4. First Language Interference and Second Language Acquisition**

Second language (L2) learning differs from first language (L1) learning. Krashen (1981) explains that obstacles arise from incomprehensible input and task difficulty. L1 interference causes English errors and habitual syntactic errors (Gumperz; S. Dill, 1971; Richards, 1971; Buteau, 1970). Literature overlooks its cognitive role and rural educational constraints.

#### **5. Teaching, Psychological Factors and Learning Environment**

Teaching and psychological factors significantly affect language learning. Exam-oriented teaching, weak L1 skills, poor strategies, socio-cultural and personal factors hinder English learning (Schwartz and Terrill, 2000; Wold, 2006). Poor teaching practices and disciplinary measures reduce motivation (Ganschow, 1998; Kannan, 2009; Crookall and Oxford, 1991). Rural institutional constraints remain underexplored.

#### **6. Global, Significance and Development of English Proficiency**

In today's globalized world, English proficiency is crucial for academic, employment, and social inclusion (Crystal, 2003). Socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors influence proficiency (Cummins, 2000, 2008; Chiswick and Miller, 2005; Ogbu, 1995). Assessment and learning programs exist, but resource limitations challenge rural Pakistan (Chapelle, Enright, and Jamieson, 2008; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Genesee et al., 2005; Warschauer and Healey, 1998; Muhammad et al., 2018; Akbari, 2015).

In summary, we have seen that English language learning is affected by a multitude of socio-economic, linguistic, educational and psychological factors. Existing research has shed light on aspects of language learning but tends to be narrow and not sensitive to the broader context. Particularly, little is known about the specific needs of rural university students. Therefore, this research is set to contribute to this field of research by providing a holistic view into the challenges faced by rural learners in learning and using English as a second language, while considering their socio-cultural and educational background

#### **Research Design**

A quantitative descriptive research design is used to describe and measure variables in a large sample (Creswell, 2014). A cross-sectional survey collects data at one point, with a comparative rural–urban element. The study adopts a positivist stance using statistical analysis and Likert-scale questionnaires (Bryman, 2016).

#### **Population of the Study**

The population includes undergraduate students in government and semi-government universities in rural and semi-urban Punjab, Pakistan (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, 2023). The accessible population includes first- to fourth-year students in English-medium programs. Urdu-medium students are excluded. Both male and female students are included for representation.

#### **Sample Technique and Sample Size**

A multi-stage cluster sampling technique was used. Three public-sector universities from rural and semi-rural Punjab were selected, followed by English-medium departments and stratified random sampling of students by year and gender. Using Yamane's (1967) formula, the required sample was 316; 380 questionnaires were distributed, and 350 valid responses were analyzed (92.1% response rate).

### Composition of the Study Sample

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	196	56.0
	Female	154	44.0
Area of Origin	Rural	220	62.9
	Semi-rural	78	22.3
	Urban	52	14.9
Year of Study	1st Year	104	29.7
	2nd Year	98	28.0
	3rd Year	86	24.6
	4th Year	62	17.7
University	University A (Gujrat)	136	38.9
	University B (MandiBahauddin)	112	32.0
	University C (Khushab)	102	29.1

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the final sample. There was a slight skew towards males, which is representative of the overall population of public-sector universities in rural Punjab. Most respondents were from rural backgrounds (62.9%), which is to be expected since the goal was to have a representative sample of the focal study group.

#### Research Instrument

A researcher-developed questionnaire based on literature (Krashen, 1982; Horwitz et al., 1986; Cummins, 2000; Tollefson, 2002; Coleman, 2010) was used. It includes demographic data, 35 Likert-scale items on linguistic, psychological, social, institutional and rural-urban challenges, and three open-ended questions. Likert scales are justified by Dörnyei (2003) for measuring learner perceptions.

#### Validity

The instrument was validated for content and construct validity. Five experts (ESL, Applied Linguistics, psychology, methodology) reviewed items; those below CVR 0.70 were revised (Lawshe, 1975). Construct validity used factor analysis ( $n=30$ ), with KMO 0.81 and Bartlett's test significant ( $p<.001$ ), confirming five factors with loadings 0.48–0.79.

#### Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which is the most common reliability measure of Likert-scale questionnaires in education and social sciences (Nunnally, 1978; George & Mallery, 2003). Reliability was calculated for each sub-scale, and for the instrument. The reliability for each dimension is shown in Table 2.

. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients

Sub-Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Linguistic Challenges	8	0.841	Good
Psychological Challenges	7	0.879	Good
Social & Cultural Challenges	7	0.826	Good
Institutional Challenges	8	0.863	Good
Rural-Urban Comparisons	5	0.812	Good
Overall Instrument	35	0.912	Excellent

As shown in Table .2, the Cronbach's Alpha for the sub-scales and the overall scale are all above the generally accepted value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), implying good to excellent internal consistency. The alpha of 0.912 is especially reassuring, as it indicates inter-item agreement for the entire questionnaire.

#### Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected over six weeks in Spring 2023–2024. After ethical and institutional approval, the researcher visited universities, explained the study, ensured confidentiality, and obtained consent. A total of 380 paper questionnaires were administered in groups, with clarification provided. Respondents completed and submitted forms immediately to ensure standardization and reduce dropouts.

#### Data Analysis Techniques

Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics summarized responses with Likert benchmarks. Independent t-test examined rural–urban differences, while one-way ANOVA tested year-wise variation with Tukey HSD. Pearson correlation measured relationships among five scales. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke (2006) for triangulation.

#### Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Table 3 below presents the demographic profile of the 350 participants in this study. Knowing the demographic makeup of the sample is critical for understanding the findings of the study and the sample's representativeness.

**Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 350)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	196	56.0
	Female	154	44.0
Age Group	17–20 years	138	39.4
	21–24 years	176	50.3
	25–28 years	30	8.6
	29+ years	6	1.7
Area of Origin	Rural	220	62.9
	Semi-rural	78	22.3
	Urban	52	14.9

Medium of Prior Schooling	Urdu	218	62.3
	English	62	17.7
	Regional Language	44	12.6
	Mixed	26	7.4
Household Income (PKR/month)	Below 20,000	94	26.9
	20,000 – 40,000	138	39.4
	40,000 – 70,000	84	24.0
	Above 70,000	34	9.7

A majority of the samples (62.9%) were from rural backgrounds, as per the design of the study. More than 60% reported that they had been educated primarily in Urdu and not in English before university, highlighting a disconnect between their pre-university language readiness and the English medium of instruction at the tertiary level. Many (66.3%) were from families with monthly incomes of less than PKR 40,000, which affects their access to resources for self-study of English.

#### Research Question 1: Challenges in Learning English

The first research question aimed to pinpoint the key challenges faced by rural university students in learning English as a second language. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for each item and for each sub-scale.

#### Linguistic Challenges

The mean scores and standard deviations of the eight items on linguistic challenges are presented in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics – Linguistic Challenges (n = 350)**

Item	Statement Summary	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Interpretation
LC1	Difficulty with English pronunciation	4.21	0.83	Strongly Agree
LC2	Struggles with grammar rules	4.18	0.79	Agree
LC3	Limited vocabulary vs. urban peers	4.36	0.74	Strongly Agree
LC4	Difficulty understanding spoken English	4.09	0.88	Agree
LC5	Difficulty writing academic essays	4.29	0.81	Strongly Agree
LC6	Code-switching in speech/writing	3.97	0.92	Agree
LC7	Difficulty reading academic	4.14	0.86	Agree

	texts			
LC8	Difficulty with formal vs. informal register	4.02	0.91	Agree
	Sub-Scale Mean	4.16	0.72	Agree

The linguistic sub-scale showed high challenges ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). Key issues included limited vocabulary ( $M = 4.36$ ), essay writing ( $M = 4.29$ ), and pronunciation ( $M = 4.21$ ), supporting Cummins' BICS–CALP distinction, indicating rural students lack academic English proficiency.

### Psychological Challenges

**Table 5: Descriptive Statistics – Psychological Challenges (n = 350)**

Item	Statement Summary	Mean (M)	Std. (SD)	Dev.	Interpretation
PC1	Anxiety when speaking English in class	4.41	0.71		Strongly Agree
PC2	Fear of making mistakes publicly	4.52	0.67		Strongly Agree
PC3	Lack of confidence in English communication	4.38	0.73		Strongly Agree
PC4	Embarrassment when not understanding English	4.19	0.84		Agree
PC5	Discouragement from urban peer comparisons	4.26	0.78		Strongly Agree
PC6	Avoidance of participation due to fear of evaluation	4.33	0.76		Strongly Agree
PC7	Avoidance of classes/presentations	3.88	0.97		Agree
	Sub-Scale Mean	4.28	0.69		Strongly Agree

Psychological sub-scale was highest ( $M = 4.28$ ), with fear of public speaking, class participation, and low confidence. Findings align with Horwitz et al. (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety, indicating chronic systemic issues.

### Social and Cultural Challenges

**Table 6: Descriptive Statistics – Social and Cultural Challenges (n = 350)**

Item	Statement Summary	Mean (M)	Std. (SD)	Dev.	Interpretation
SC1	Community does not encourage English at home	4.12	0.87		Agree
SC2	Few English speakers to practise	4.38	0.72		Strongly Agree

	with				
SC3	Cultural hesitance to speak English openly	3.94	0.93	Agree	
SC4	Limited access to English media while growing up	4.44	0.68	Strongly Agree	
SC5	English not valued in home community	3.86	0.99	Agree	
SC6	Gender norms limiting English practice opportunities	3.74	1.04	Agree	
SC7	Cultural distance in English lesson content	4.01	0.88	Agree	
	Sub-Scale Mean	4.07	0.73	Agree	

Social and cultural challenges showed high mean ( $M = 4.07$ ), especially lack of English media and speakers. Findings highlight limited sociolinguistic exposure, supporting Norton's (2000) concept of restricted investment space

#### **Institutional Challenges**

**Table 7: Descriptive Statistics – Institutional Challenges (n = 350)**

Item	Statement Summary	Mean (M)	Std. (SD)	Dev.	Interpretation
IC1	School English teachers inadequately qualified	4.18	0.83	Agree	
IC2	Teaching methods reliant on rote memorization	4.31	0.77	Strongly Agree	
IC3	Shortage of English learning resources at school	4.41	0.71	Strongly Agree	
IC4	Oversized classes prevent effective practice	4.22	0.80	Strongly Agree	
IC5	University courses not tailored to rural students	4.09	0.88	Agree	
IC6	Absence of bridging/remedial support at university	4.29	0.78	Strongly Agree	
IC7	Insufficient conversation practice at university	4.16	0.84	Agree	
IC8	University English exams harder than prepared for	4.38	0.73	Strongly Agree	
	Sub-Scale Mean	4.26	0.71	Strongly Agree	

Institutional factors showed high agreement ( $M = 4.26$ ), especially lack of resources, difficult exams, and rote learning. Absence of bridging programs highlights systemic gaps between rural

and urban learners.

Research question 2 identified structural, socioeconomic, and sociolinguistic causes. Key issues include unequal teacher distribution, underfunding, curriculum mismatch, and lack of bridging courses. Poverty, low parental education, limited resources, and minimal English exposure further restrict learning, with gender-based cultural constraints reducing language practice opportunities in rural areas.

**RQ3: Impact on Academic Success and Participation**

The third research question explored the impact of English language difficulties on rural students' academic success and participation. An impact index was calculated by averaging the responses to the 35 items for each student and then correlating this score with self-reported academic success (satisfaction rating of GPA) and participation.

**Correlation Matrix of Sub-Scale Scores**

Table 8: Pearson Correlation Matrix — Challenge Sub-Scales (n = 350)

Sub-Scale	Linguistic	Psychological	Social	Institutional	Rural-Urban
Linguistic	1.000	0.673**	0.591**	0.648**	0.524**
Psychological	0.673**	1.000	0.614**	0.582**	0.599**
Social	0.591**	0.614**	1.000	0.573**	0.611**
Institutional	0.648**	0.582**	0.573**	1.000	0.537**
Rural-Urban	0.524**	0.599**	0.611**	0.537**	1.000

All five sub-scales are positively and significantly correlated ( $p < .01$ ), with strongest link between linguistic and psychological challenges ( $r = 0.673$ ), indicating interrelated, mutually reinforcing dimensions of difficulty.

76.3% of rural students rarely participated in English classes versus 31.5% urban. Also, 68.6% reported grade impact, showing challenges are consequential, not just experiential, with significant rural–urban differences observed.

: Independent Samples t-Test — Rural vs. Urban Students

Sub-Scale	Rural Mean	Urban Mean	t-value	df	Sig. (p)	Cohen's d
Linguistic Challenges	4.31	3.44	9.12	270	< .001	0.82
Psychological Challenges	4.47	3.51	10.38	270	< .001	0.91
Social & Cultural Challenges	4.22	3.29	8.76	270	< .001	0.78
Institutional Challenges	4.41	3.38	11.04	270	< .001	0.97
Rural-Urban Comparisons	4.19	3.16	9.87	270	< .001	0.86
Overall Composite Score	4.32	3.36	11.52	270	< .001	1.01

Rural students scored higher on all challenge sub-scales ( $p < .001$ ). Institutional and psychological differences were greatest. Large effect sizes ( $d \geq 0.80$ ) confirm statistically and educationally significant rural–urban gaps.

### **One-Way ANOVA: Challenge Scores by Year**

One-way ANOVA showed significant differences across years ( $F = 4.28, p = .005$ ). First-year students reported higher challenges than third and fourth years, indicating reduced challenges over time.

#### **Key Findings**

Key findings show high challenges in linguistic, psychological, social-cultural, and institutional areas. Psychological issues are greatest. Rural students face more difficulties than urban peers. Challenges are interrelated, decrease slightly over years, and stem from structural, socioeconomic, and sociolinguistic factors, supported by qualitative data.

### **Summary, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion, Limitations And Recommendation**

#### **Summary of the Study**

This study explored and examined the challenges rural university students experience in learning English in Pakistan, focusing on three public universities in Punjab Province. The study was motivated by the observation that rural students perform worse in English-medium higher education than urban students, despite limited research in Pakistan's higher education context. Four research questions examined the nature of ESL challenges, their causes, their effects on academic performance and participation, and rural–urban differences. A quantitative descriptive design was adopted using a validated researcher-designed 35-statement questionnaire and three open-ended questions. Through multi-stage cluster sampling, 350 undergraduate students participated. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation and thematic analysis, guided by Krashen (1982), Horwitz et al. (1986), Cummins (2000), Norton (2000), and Bourdieu (1991).

#### **Key Findings**

Rural students experienced high challenges in psychological ( $M=4.28$ ), institutional ( $M=4.26$ ), linguistic ( $M=4.16$ ), and social-cultural ( $M=4.07$ ) dimensions. Vocabulary gaps and academic writing were the major linguistic barriers, while fear of mistakes and speaking anxiety dominated psychological challenges. Institutional barriers included lack of resources and proficiency mismatches. Causes operated at macro (policy inequities), meso (institutional deficiencies), and micro (poverty, cultural and sociolinguistic limitations) levels. English challenges negatively affected participation and grades. Rural students scored significantly higher than urban students across all dimensions ( $p < .001; d=0.78-1.01$ ), especially institutional challenges.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Findings support previous ESL research (Horwitz et al., 1986; Nation, 2001; Read, 2004) and indicate that language anxiety among rural Pakistani students reflects structural inequality rather than individual limitations. Institutional barriers and lack of support reproduce educational inequity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The interrelated nature of ESL challenges requires multidimensional interventions. Overall, rural students' ESL difficulties reflect long-standing educational inequities, requiring policy, institutional and classroom reforms to promote educational equity in Pakistan.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has several limitations. First, it was limited to three public universities in Punjab Province; therefore, findings may not fully apply to other provinces or private universities. Second, data were collected through self-report surveys, which may involve over- or under-reporting of experiences. Third, the cross-sectional design captured challenges at one point in time and did not examine changes over time. Fourth, only student perspectives were included, excluding teachers and administrators.

### Recommendations

This study recommends that policymakers, higher education institutions, and English teachers implement coordinated reforms to improve rural English education. Policies should ensure differential resource allocation, including trained teachers, infrastructure upgrades, and digital connectivity in rural schools. Curriculum should shift from grammar-translation to communicative and task-based approaches, supported by a national Rural English Language Development Program under HEC. HEIs should introduce compulsory foundation English programs, establish English Language Resource Centers, peer mentoring systems, and embed EAP modules. English teachers should adopt learner-centered, communicative methods, create safe learning spaces, use digital media, and connect language tasks to rural students' contexts effectively.

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