



EXPLORING ESL STUDENTS' SELF-CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING ENGLISH AT CENTRAL PUNJAB UNIVERSITIES, PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

Acquiring English as a second language could be a complicated process for non-native learners due to cultural differences, teaching strategies, unfamiliar environment and lack of speaking confidence and skills in front of people. The article emphasizes on the importance of English as a global language to attain opportunities worldwide, challenges faced by ESL learners' and some strategies which can improve the confidence of learners. This research is conducted to identify, which are the major factors that hinder learners to speak English confidently and fluently. Quantitative method is used in conducting research through online survey. The data has been collected by close-ended questionnaire. The respondents of this study are the students of Higher Secondary Education, BS students who are getting this degree in both public and private sectors, and the students who have completed their degrees but still can't speak English confidently and fluently in front of people.

Keywords:

English as a Second Language, ESL students, Self confidence, Self-esteem, Difficulties in speaking a second language, English proficiency, Anxiety, Peace Education, Mentalism.

Introduction

English is taught and learned in diverse contexts and classroom settings, each of which significantly shapes the approach employed to teach the language. Within this scope, English is often delivered through a use-based framework known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The rising interest in learning English has led to frequent exploration of individual motivational factors. As Khan, Bilal, and Nawaz (2023) noted, such factors play a pivotal role in shaping students' engagement with English as a pathway for employment opportunities in Pakistan's South Punjab.

While many universities in Central Punjab are recognizing English language proficiency as a factor that could lead to academic and professional success, it has become essential to understand that acquiring good proficiency in English unlocks further educational and worldwide opportunities. On the other hand, many ESL students find it really difficult to attain self confidence in the situations in which they have to speak English, which adversely impacts both their academic performance and social interactions. Speaking is one of the core language skills, alongside reading, writing, and listening, and is essential for sharing thoughts, feelings, and opinions. A person's success can be measured through his/her ability to speak in a social



gathering. As Zuhriyah (2017), speaking is the primary means through which ideas are expressed orally. Aye and Phyu (2015:1) as cited in Zuhriyah (2017), effective English speaking skill is a primary need in this globalization era. Additionally, Sepahvand (2014:1847) as cited in Zuhriyah (2017), speaking can be considered a basic aim of study because of a person's personal satisfaction, and to achieve career goals.

Despite years of formal education, a significant number of students in Central Punjab still cannot speak English fluently. This is because of the reason that certain lectures are delivered in Urdu language but the students are asked to present their assignments or projects in English.

ESL is defined as the teaching of English to individuals whose first language is not English. An estimation by the British Council says that, there are over 1.5 billion ESL learners in the world, including both the ESL learners and EFL learners. This estimation highlights the importance of English language and its demand in the Education and business sector. However, despite its growing demand and the importance of English in the work environment, many ESL students, especially university students in Central Punjab fight with oral proficiency. ESL poses a unique challenge because of the learners' diverse backgrounds, mother tongues, and cultures. A low level of self-confidence is one of the most evident barriers to fluency. Self confidence is a person's capability to face a challenge. Gencçtan, 1984; Özbey, 2004) as cited in (Gurler, 2015), a person's recognition of his own self, his abilities, his emotions is a person's self confidence. According to Templin (1995) as cited in (Khairuddin, 2017), a Japanese student is unable to speak in English fluently despite studying it for six years, because of low self-confidence of the Japanese. Many students in Central Punjab Universities are usually asked to present their assignments in front of the class orally in English, but they are afraid because of their low self-confidence. This is mainly because English is not their official language.

Thus, most students in Central Punjab Universities lack the self-confidence necessary for oral proficiency due to grammatical problems and the fear of committing mistakes. One of the main aspects is students high anxiety level, making the ESL learners not use the targeted language especially in a speaking classroom. Various researchers proved that through their respective articles like Tuan and Mai, 2015; Ansari, 2015; and Savasci, 2013. They constantly question their self-esteem by thinking, what if I mispronounced a certain word or phrase? Or what if I unknowingly made a grammatical mistake? They think that they will get mocked by other students if they speak in English. Ultimately, this fear results in low self-confidence and high anxiety level. Thus, in order to speak fluently in English, self-confidence is the key. Therefore, this research investigates the importance of self-confidence among ESL students specifically in Central Punjab Universities regarding their ability to express themselves in English and identifies the main factors that enhance or inhibit their self- confidence.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

- To evaluate the confidence levels of ESL students in their speaking abilities.
- To identify the underlying causes contributing to low confidence among ESL students.
- To analyze the impact of environmental factors on the English learning process.
- To explore strategies and factors that can effectively enhance the speaking proficiency of ESL students.



Literature Review

Pakistan is a multilingual country, and the people of the Punjab, in particular, speak various languages such as Punjabi and Urdu, making English a Second Language. Even at schools with an English medium curriculum, students face difficulties in speaking English confidently or fluently. Social environment, cultural backgrounds, and the status of English in the region play a significant role in shaping ESL students' confidence. We all speak English inside and outside our homes. Unlike foreigners, we are not born and brought up speaking English. This is the biggest barrier for students in their pursuit of fluency. Secondly, students feel shy when they are asked to speak English. So they never do enough practice of speaking. There may be a problem for a lot of students in Central Punjab regarding pronunciation and accent which may reduce their confidence level.

Students who have grown up in rural or underdeveloped regions may not know the language and are thus denied the path to opportunities for improvement. The students' self-confidence in speaking English, according to Nety and Nurhaeni (2020), is an interesting subject to study. Self-confidence indicates a person can hold his ground in front of adversities, has the liberty to do things he wishes to, and confronts problems with elasticity.

On the other hand and in a different perspective, peace education plays a crucial role in promoting both internal and external peace. Internal peace, defined as an individual's personal tranquility, and external peace, characterized by societal harmony, are inherently interdependent. The foundation of societal peace often lies in the internal peace of its members, as individuals collectively form a society. When formal education integrates lessons on peace, individuals are more likely to embody and practice peace, contributing to the creation of a harmonious community. Moreover, societal peace, characterized by the absence of conflicts, wars, or violence, can directly influence an individual's internal peace by eliminating psychological and physical disturbances.

This dynamic interrelationship between internal and external peace holds relevance in various educational contexts, including language learning environments. As Khan and Shahzadi (2024) highlight, peace education not only fosters societal tranquility but also enhances individual confidence and self-expression. This is particularly significant in the context of exploring ESL students' self-confidence in speaking English at Central Punjab universities, where a peaceful and supportive learning atmosphere can encourage students to overcome language-related anxieties and develop their communication skills effectively.

According to MacIntyre (2004) as cited in Gurler, 2015 the learners with high language confidence participate more in any spontaneous communication as compared to people with low confidence. The argument of supportive environments is also suggested by him, which helps in communicating effectively without any type of hesitation therein. Teaching strategy as well as classrooms can make an effect on learning any language through many aspects. In Central Punjab, at the initial stages of student education, teaching is not performed in English. This may lead to critical concerns when they go to higher levels of education or enter into professional life.

Learning English is not only complicated because of its complex vocabulary but also a good communicator needs to know how to adjust with its accent and culture. The ESL learners have a problem speaking confidently in English. Gonzalez, M. These factors are contributing to their lack of self-confidence as ESL learners and it includes language barriers, the fear of making



mistakes, and cultural differences. According to Gonzalez, M. in 2018, language barrier contributes greatly to hindering the ESL learners' self-confidence while speaking in English at Universities. As we explain earlier, many ESL learners come from a non-English speaking background, and English may not be their first language. Therefore, they struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, which may lead to difficulties in expressing themselves effectively. These language barriers are the cause ESL learners are self-conscious to take part in the classroom discussion or presentation due to the fear of judging and misunderstanding from peers and professors. He further pointed out another factor affecting ESL learners' self-confidence in speaking English at universities, i.e., fear of making mistakes. Students are usually afraid of grammatical mistakes or mispronunciation, being laughed at, or negative evaluation. This fear is responsible for anxiety among ESL students. It also reduces their intention to communicate or WTC. As a result of this, they may prefer to keep silence or avoid opportunities to speak, which further lowers their confidence as well as language development. Another reason is our education system; we try to teach English as a subject, not as a language itself. Students set their minds to pass English as a subject in the annual Examination and then try to jump into the next grade. So, they do cramming, and then it doesn't work in their professional lives. To sum it up ESL learners face many problems that increase their low self-confidence when speaking in English in universities.

In the context of ESL students' self-confidence in speaking English at Central Punjab universities, this perspective is particularly significant. As Khan (2024) argues, supportive educational practices that value mistakes as learning opportunities can enhance critical thinking and bolster students' confidence in language acquisition. By cultivating a classroom atmosphere that prioritizes growth and exploration, students are better equipped to develop their speaking skills and overcome language-related challenges.

Murray (2006) says, "Self-confident people are those ones who believe in one's abilities."

According to Adalikwu (2012) "self confidence is believing that a person can do something owing to his ability to succeed".

Lawrence(2006) says" self- confidence is collection of thoughts about one"s talents and abilities.

There are also so many studies showing positive interconnection between self-confidence and success.

(Covington, 1984; Laird, 2005; Otacioglu, 2008 as cited in Gurler (2015). In a Qualitative study, Hanton, Mellalieu and Hall (2003) as cited in Gurler (2015) reveal how low self-confidence level affects performance and extract a sentence from one of the participants' responses to their interview: "If self-confidence is low, then the feelings start to edge towards the negative which would be very bad for performance" (p. 481). Another extraction in the same research shows how efficient the high level of self-confidence is: "High self-confidence increases the intensity of thoughts and feelings that you can control... If you're confident you stay in control of your thoughts..." (p.481).

Hence, students who have self-confidence and consciousness are bound to be successful in learning due to the mere reason of believing in themselves and never giving up Lawrence. In order to overcome all the challenges faced by ESL learners in communicating orally, a university



should offer required support and resources to address the needs of ESL Learners in order to build up their self-confidence and foster an environment of inclusivity for all students.

Some Studies:

It is only through practice that students can gain confidence in speaking. Some of the theories such as Behaviorism and Social Interactionist Theory show that someone can perceive language through practice regarding one's daily routine.

Lev Vygotsky presented the Social Interactionist Theory. This theory outlines that learning is primarily based on social interaction, communication, and collaboration with others. The confidence level of ESL students' can be built by communicating with others and by practicing the language.

Behaviorism, suggested by John B. Watson and B.F Skinner, is a theory that generally focuses on observable behaviors and how one can understand certain actions in reference to environmental stimuli. The application of this within an ESL context is helpful; for this theory, most definitely stresses that learning generally comes through practice and repetition. For instance, the ESL learners may start some repetitive activities such as solving grammar exercises, speaking practice, or pronunciation practice. By doing so, they can gain confidence in speaking English bit by bit.

The attitudes of individuals in Pakistan's South Punjab towards English teaching have undergone a significant transformation, with a noticeable increase in motivation and interest in pursuing this profession. This shift is largely attributed to heightened awareness and the expanding career opportunities available in the job market for English teachers.

In relation to ESL students' self-confidence in speaking English at Central Punjab universities, this growing interest in English teaching highlights the importance of promoting positive attitudes and motivation in language learning. As Khan and Khan (2024) note, the increased inclination towards English teaching reflects the recognition of English as a valuable tool for personal and professional growth, further emphasizing the need for supportive learning environments that build students' confidence and proficiency in the language.

Methodology

This research is conducted to find out the confidence level of learners in speaking English and the troubles faced by them that hinder their confidence. In this research, a quantitative approach has been employed to explore the factors behind their poor confidence level in speaking English. This research provides in-depth understanding of students' experiences and perspectives related to this phenomenon. Data have been collected by using an online questionnaire survey through Google form. Questions were closed, and multiple options were provided in which the respondents were asked to choose one answer that relates to their problem or if they agree with the statement. The participants of this survey are the students who have completed their graduation but still face hesitation in speaking English confidently and fluently, and the undergraduates belong to different universities of the Punjab in both public and private sectors.

Results and Discussion

This research explores the importance of being aware about English language from initial level to avoid troubles when we move to our practical or professional life. It also examines the

factors behind those difficulties in speaking English. In the regard of collecting data, multiple questions are made and four choices are given for one statement.

SD	DA	A	SA
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SD: Strongly Disagree

DA: Disagree

A: Agree

SA: Strongly Agree

Results:

Questions and their responses are mentioned below:

Q.1 What is your background?

Options:

Urban	Rural
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Responses:

62.5%	37.5%
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Q.2 How long have you been learning English?

Options:

6-7 Years	9+ Years
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Responses:

56%	44%
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Q.3 What is your current academic level?

Options:

Graduate	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
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Responses:

41.7%	45.8%	12.5%
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Q.4 I feel nervous when I speak English in front of people.

SD	DA	A	SA
8%	24%	60%	8%

Q.5 I can express my idea clearly in English.

SD	DA	A	SA
0%	32%	60%	8%

Q.6 I feel comfortable participating in group discussion in English.

SD	DA	A	SA
12%	24%	44%	20%

Q.7 I can't speak English without preparation.

SD	DA	A	SA
20.8%	29.2%	50%	0%

Q.8 I avoid speaking English because I am afraid of making mistakes.

SD	DA	A	SA
12%	24%	52%	12%

Q.9 Attending English language classes or workshops has increased my confidence level in speaking English.

SD	DA	A	SA
0%	8%	48%	44%

Q.10 The support or feedback from teachers helps to boost my confidence level in speaking English.

SD	DA	A	SA
0%	0%	76%	24%

Q.11 My limited vocabulary makes hard for me to speak English confidently and fluently.

SD	DA	A	SA
4%	24%	44%	28%

Q.12 I don't have enough opportunities to practice English in my daily life.

SD	DA	A	SA
8%	16%	48%	28%

Q.13 I feel, If I had better environment to speak English from my childhood; so I would be a fluent and confident English speaker today.

SD	DA	A	SA
4%	0%	56%	40%

Q.14 I feel my confidence level is increasing overtime by practicing.

SD	DA	A	SA
0%	0%	64%	36%

Discussion:

Out of the entire participants 63% respondents are living in developed areas, Instead of living in urban areas people are still unable to speak English confidently because of their environment where majority of population doesn't take this language seriously from basic level. They don't consider this fact that our articulators produce that language which is acquired from our childhood.

This can be a deficiency of our education system where English is taught and learnt as a subject rather than as a language. It has been more than nine years since the students pursuing English but still they can't understand it properly because we take this as a subject just to pass the examination.



After obtaining 4 years of Education in English, learners face difficulties in getting proficiency. 42% students have completed their degrees but when they want to attain better opportunities either within the country or abroad, they have to prepare themselves to communicate with others. This is because they don't practice to speak English while pursuing their degrees.

One of the major hurdles in getting confidence and fluency is that people get afraid of making mistakes or they think that other people will laugh if they make mistakes in English speaking. These mistakes can be about grammar and pronunciation. Therefore they avoid speaking English in front of people and they do not practice then.

Majority of the people say that if they have words or English vocabulary, they could express their ideas clearly in English but due to the lack of this they are having trouble with speaking.

Most of the participants do agree that if they talk in English with their friends or colleagues, they don't get nervous because they are close enough to them that they can easily communicate with them to improve their skills. After analyzing this thing it can be said that group conversation is crucial to become a confident speaker.

Here some of people are saying that before going to communicate with others they have to practice of what they are going to talk about. They are not confident enough to speak without preparation. Our classrooms are the best places to practice because every learner is struggling for correction there. It provides us a sufficient environment to practice.

This is one of the major issues why people don't speak English because they are afraid of speaking wrong words. They have fear that people will laugh at them. Due to this they don't try to speak. 52% respondents agree to this statement that people will make fun of them if they speak wrong English.

Majority of people says that participating in English workshops or classes is beneficial for them to improve their speaking skills. About 50% of respondents claim that after attending English language classes they noticed improvement in their confidence level. So this thing can be adopted in speaking journey to gain better results.

An encouraging feedback or support from teacher helps to boost confidence in learners. Teachers examine those mistakes which are made by a language learner and then provide a better solution to correct those mistakes. 76% participants claim that constructive feedback from teacher proves beneficial for them.

Limited vocabulary of the students is one of the major hurdles. Approximately 45% of respondents agree to this statement that they can't speak confidently because they have limited vocabulary which makes them hesitate to speak English fluently. Some steps can be followed to solve this trouble i.e. Reading English text, Writing difficult words with their synonyms, Using those words in everyday conversation to remember properly

Most of the people claim that they don't have opportunities in their daily routines to practice like they don't have persons to whom they should talk. But consider this fact that you can become a fluent English speaker by practicing. You should speak in English without consideration of making mistakes. When you produce any sentence and there is mistake in it, after speaking you would realize what the mistake you are making is and then you try to correct it. And when you don't even try to speak it becomes hard to build confidence and fluency.

We learn language from our environment. In Punjab people speak Urdu and newly born babies acquire this language because there is environment of speaking that language. In this research



survey 96% people are saying that they didn't have environment of speaking English since their childhood. Therefore today they are facing difficulties in getting fluency.

After considering the importance of English language, people practice that language to have better opportunities worldwide. 100% people who are practicing of speaking English say that they notice that their confidence level is getting improved as time passing.

After this survey we can clearly examine that due to the environment, lack of focus from basic level, limited vocabulary, and the fear of making mistakes; learners are reluctant to speak English confidently.

Conclusion:

At the end of all the research, the study shows complex interplay of factors effecting language acquisition and confidence. Students face challenges due to social, cultural, and educational constraints, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

On the other hand, students who receive consistent support and positive feedback from teachers or mentors access to English speaking environment and encouragement to practice speaking in non judgmental settings tend to develop higher confidence level among students. The findings emphasize the importance of developing confidence of speaking English in front of people to learn from mistakes and captivating environment should be created to engage in learning process.

Additionally, the study suggests that university administrative and faculty should consider integrating more inclusive and student centered pedagogies to foster a comfortable atmosphere for language learning.

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