ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING OF CHALLENGING STUDENTS: A UNIVERSITY CASE

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Abstract
English language learning remains a significant challenge for non-native speakers, especially in Pakistan. Despite the widespread use of English as a second language in Pakistan, many students struggle with fluency and accuracy due to various linguistic, social, and educational factors. This paper explores the common English challenges faced by Pakistani students, identifies the main causes of these difficulties, and reviews relevant literature on language acquisition. A Face-to-face interview was administered to 100 students to get real understanding of the challenges of English language learning. This face-to-face interview presents valuable insight into the challenges and strategies adopted by students learning English language. Analysis of student feedback on Learning English showed challenges as well as effective Practices for Improving speaking and writing skills, group interaction and preferred methods, content preference and feedback and praise.The study highlights phonetic, socio-cultural, and educational factors that contribute to these challenges. Based on an analysis of existing literature and firsthand observations, this article aims to provide insights into how these challenges can be addressed in the English language learning and teaching.
Keyword: English language learning, non-native speakers, linguistic challenges, fluency, accuracy, socio-cultural factors, teaching strategies, Pakistan

Introduction
English language is an official language in Pakistan and is widely used in education, business, and government. However, despite its prevalence, students in Pakistan often face significant challenges in mastering English language fluency and accuracy. This issue affects their ability to communicate effectively and limits their success in both academic and professional environments. The language difficulties are not solely attributed to the difference between English and Urdu phonology but are also influenced by socio-cultural factors, the variety of English spoken, and the educational system itself.

This paper seeks to explore the specific learning challenges faced by Pakistani students and the underlying reasons behind these challenges. It will also discuss the impact of these issues on understanding, communication and academic success.

Background
Pakistan is a linguistically diverse country, with more than 70 languages spoken across the country. The most widely spoken languages are Urdu and Punjabi, with English being the second language for many Pakistanis. The structures of Urdu and other regional languages often differ significantly

from English, leading to difficulties in acquiring English language proficiency. For instance, Urdu lacks certain English sounds like /v/, /θ/, and /ð/, which causes Pakistani learners to substitute these sounds with other, more familiar ones.

Moreover, the English taught in Pakistan is often influenced by regional accents and is not always standardized, which further complicates the development of English language skills. Pakistani students typically learn English through written textbooks, with limited focus on speaking and listening. This emphasis on reading and writing over speaking results in a gap in oral proficiency. Educational factors also play a crucial role in this issue. Teachers, often non-native English speakers themselves, lack proper knowledge and training in teaching of English. The also lake to provide necessary guidance to help students overcome their challenges. Furthermore, the examination system in Pakistan prioritizes written exams over oral assessments, meaning that students' spoken English, is rarely evaluated or addressed in a structured manner.

Literature Review

The challenges faced by learners in acquiring English as a second language (ESL) have been extensively studied across various linguistic and educational contexts. This literature review examines some of the key factors contributing to difficulties in English language acquisition, with a specific focus on the context of Pakistan, as well as the role of technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), in language learning.

One of the primary challenges faced by Pakistani students learning English is the influence of their first language (L1), particularly Urdu and regional languages such as Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi. Studies have shown that linguistic transfer—where students apply the phonological and syntactical rules of their native language to English—can lead to significant errors. Deterding and Kuman (2017) found that native Urdu speakers, for example, often struggle with English sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue, such as the distinction between /p/ and /b/ or /ʃ/ and /s/. This linguistic transfer contributes to difficulties in both pronunciation and intelligibility when speaking English.

Further complicating matters, Rahman (1996) points out that the variation in English accents within Pakistan itself, influenced by local languages, makes it even more challenging for Pakistani learners to standardize their English pronunciation. The regional accents and the influence of the mother tongue, particularly in the case of Urdu and Punjabi, often result in pronunciation patterns that interfere with intelligibility, especially when interacting with native English speakers or individuals from other parts of Pakistan.

Limited exposure to native English speakers has also been identified as a significant barrier in Pakistani students' language acquisition. Richards and Schmidt (2002) argue that the lack of interaction with native speakers hinders learners from developing accurate pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, and stress patterns typical of natural English speech. This limited exposure prevents students from internalizing the natural flow of the language, making it more difficult for them to develop fluency.

Additionally, motivation plays a critical role in language acquisition. Many learners in Pakistan feel discouraged by the challenges they face in learning English, and this can lead to a lack of engagement in the learning process. Yulia (2013) highlights how such motivational issues are compounded by the high expectations placed on students to achieve proficiency, often without sufficient support or encouragement from teachers.

Traditional teaching methods in Pakistan, which heavily emphasize grammar and rote learning, do not foster the development of speaking skills, as speaking is often neglected in favor of written language. Farooq (2013) argues that this approach fails to address the communication needs of students, particularly in real-life situations where spoken English is necessary. Similarly, Jawaid (2016) discusses the limitations of traditional teaching methods, such as memorization, which do not adequately prepare students for engaging in conversation or applying their language skills in practical scenarios.

Recent studies, such as those by Shaheen and Baig (2020), suggest that more modern approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), could help address these challenges. By integrating more interactive and communicative tasks into classroom activities, including role-plays, group discussions, and debates, students would have more opportunities to practice speaking and improve their fluency. Furthermore, the use of audio-visual materials can create an immersive environment that promotes the development of listening and speaking skills.

In recent years, the literature on AI in language learning has expanded significantly, particularly with the development of AI-driven tools for improving speaking and writing skills. Lee and Lee (2020) discuss the impact of AI technologies such as automated essay scoring and AI writing assistants in improving students' writing skills by providing instant feedback on grammar, structure, and coherence. These tools offer students the opportunity to develop their writing while receiving immediate corrective feedback, thus enhancing both their writing competence and confidence.

Speech recognition technologies, which have been integrated into virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant, also play a crucial role in improving students' speaking abilities. Jones et al. (2019) highlight how these tools help students practice conversational skills by providing real-time feedback on pronunciation and fluency. The feedback from speech recognition systems enables students to identify and correct their spoken errors, thereby promoting a more accurate and confident use of English in speech.

Recent research has explored the potential of integrating both speaking and writing practices through AI technologies. Li (2021) notes that tools combining speech recognition with writing assistance create a more holistic approach to language learning. Speech-to-text software, for example, allows students to verbally express their ideas and then convert those ideas into written form. This seamless transition between speaking and writing enhances vocabulary retention and reinforces grammatical concepts.

Moreover, studies such as those by Zhang and Wang (2022) indicate that AI-driven language platforms that provide both speaking practice (e.g., virtual speaking partners) and writing assistance lead to improvements in both spoken and written outputs. Students who used AI for speaking practice in combination with writing assistants exhibited greater fluency in speech and better organization and coherence in writing. These findings suggest that the integration of speaking and writing skills through AI tools can lead to complementary improvements in overall language proficiency.

Despite the potential benefits, there are challenges in effectively implementing AI tools in educational contexts. Smith (2021) warns that AI-based tools, while helpful, may lack the contextual nuance and personalized feedback that human instructors provide. For instance, AI writing tools may struggle to capture the subtleties of creative expression or the intended tone of
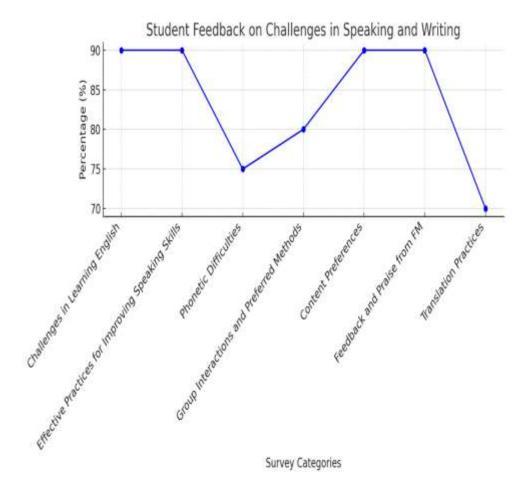
a piece of writing. Therefore, while AI tools are valuable resources, they should complement, not replace, traditional teacher-led instruction.

The literature on English language learning highlights several interconnected challenges, from linguistic transfer and limited exposure to native speakers to outdated teaching methods and lack of speaking practice. However, the integration of modern teaching approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching, and the use of AI tools for speaking and writing practice offer promising solutions to address these challenges. Future research could explore how these AI technologies can be more effectively integrated into language learning environments to support both students and teachers in overcoming the barriers to English language proficiency.

Findings

The findings of this study, based on face-to-face interviews with 100 students, provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by Pakistani tertiary students in learning spoken English. The analysis of the students' feedback is depicted in the form of the following graph:

This graph illustrates student feedback on challenges in speaking and writing, categorized into various areas. The highest percentages (around 90%) were noted in "Challenges in Learning English" and "Feedback and Praise from FM," indicating these areas are highly significant to students. Conversely, the lowest response (70%) was observed in "Translation Practices," highlighting it as a less prioritized concern. Moderate responses were recorded in "Phonetic

Difficulties" and "Group Interactions and Preferred Methods," while "Content Preferences" and "Effective Practices for Improving Speaking Skills" showed varying levels of importance, reflecting diverse challenges and preferences among students.

1. **Challenges in Learning English:**
   A significant majority of the respondents (90%) identified confidence issues and fear of speaking as their primary challenges in learning English. This indicates that psychological barriers, such as anxiety and fear of judgment, play a far greater role than technical difficulties like grammar, which only 10% of students cited as their main challenge. These findings suggest that overcoming the emotional and psychological hurdles associated with speaking English is crucial for students to improve their proficiency.

2. **Effective Practices for Improving Speaking Skills:**
   Most students (90%) believe that engaging in public speaking activities, such as presentations and debates, is an effective practice for improving their speaking skills. These activities not only provide students with opportunities to practice their oral communication but also help in building their confidence. A smaller proportion of students (10%) emphasized the importance of regular practice through daily conversations and self-paced speaking exercises. This demonstrates that structured public speaking opportunities and self-driven practice are both essential for skill enhancement.

3. **Phonetic Difficulties:**
   Phonetic challenges remain a significant issue for many students. Approximately 75% of respondents reported difficulties in pronouncing sounds such as "CH" and "J," which are not commonly used in Urdu or other regional languages in Pakistan. Another 25% of students found the "R" sound particularly challenging, reflecting the varied nature of phonetic issues across learners. These findings underscore the need for targeted phonetic training to address these specific difficulties.

4. **Group Interactions and Preferred Methods:**
   When it comes to group activities, 80% of students expressed a preference for engaging in group discussions with 3-4 participants. Such activities allow students to practice their speaking skills in a more collaborative and less intimidating environment. On the other hand, pair interactions were less popular, with only 20% of students favoring this method. This highlights the importance of designing language learning activities that foster group interactions while minimizing the pressure often associated with smaller, one-on-one exchanges.

5. **Content Preferences:**
   Students demonstrated a strong preference for speaking exercises that were relatable and personally engaging. A notable 90% of respondents rated "Myself (FAN SCIENCE)". An acronym Urdu to make 10 easy students on myself speaking exercises as both easy and useful, indicating that personalized and contextually relevant content enhances their engagement and learning outcomes. A smaller group (10%) preferred picture-reading

activities, which also promote creativity and contextual understanding, though to a lesser extent than personalized exercises.

6. **Feedback and Praise from Faculty Members:**
   The role of faculty feedback and encouragement emerged as a significant factor in the students' learning journey. A majority of the students (90%) reported that positive feedback from their instructors motivated them to improve their speaking skills. Similarly, 80% of respondents felt encouraged by faculty praise, suggesting that supportive and constructive interactions with educators are vital in building confidence and fostering improvement.

7. **Translation Practices:**
   Translation emerged as a helpful strategy for many students. Approximately 70% of respondents found that translating words and phrases from English to their native language helped them in understanding and retaining new vocabulary. However, 30% preferred other methods, such as direct usage or context-based learning, highlighting the diverse preferences and learning styles among students.

These findings collectively shed light on the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by students learning English language in Pakistan. The insights emphasize the importance of addressing both psychological and technical barriers through targeted interventions, such as structured public speaking opportunities, phonetic training, collaborative group activities, and constructive faculty feedback. Furthermore, incorporating personalized and culturally relevant content into the curriculum can significantly enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

This feedback sheds light on key areas to address, such as boosting confidence in speaking, targeted phonetic practice, and the importance of supportive faculty interactions. By incorporating these insights, educators can create more effective, inclusive, and supportive language learning environments.

Discussion

English language learning (speaking) continues to be a significant challenge for Pakistani students learning English, rooted in a complex interplay of linguistic, socio-cultural, and educational factors. The phonological differences between English and regional languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto often lead to substitutions or omissions of sounds that are not present in native languages. For instance, sounds like /v/, /θ/, and /ð/ are frequently mispronounced due to their absence in Urdu phonology. This linguistic transfer, combined with strong regional accents, affects the intelligibility of students' spoken English and further complicates their ability to communicate effectively.

The lack of exposure to native English speakers exacerbates these challenges. Students primarily learn English through non-native teachers and textbooks that prioritize grammar and writing over speaking and listening. This limited exposure hinders their ability to internalize natural speaking patterns, including rhythm, stress, and intonation. Furthermore, the systemic emphasis on written assessments within Pakistan's educational framework leaves oral proficiency largely untested, leading to a neglect of speaking skills in formal instruction.

The study's findings underscore the psychological barriers students face, such as a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes, which significantly impede their willingness to practice speaking. Phonetic difficulties, such as the sounds of "CH," "J," and "R" sounds, are common and

require targeted training. Students' feedback highlighted the effectiveness of group interactions, public speaking activities, and constructive faculty support in overcoming these barriers. However, it also revealed a need for personalized and culturally relevant teaching content to better engage learners.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Incorporating phonetic training into the English curriculum can help students understand and practice the sounds of English more effectively. Teachers need professional development opportunities to enhance their understanding of phonetics and modern language teaching methods. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and task-based learning approaches, which emphasize interactive speaking activities, can help students build confidence and fluency in a supportive environment.

Technology offers additional opportunities to address challenges in speaking. AI-driven tools such as speech recognition software, virtual speaking assistants, and multimedia resources can provide students with real-time feedback and opportunities to practice in an engaging and low-pressure setting. Integrating these tools into classroom instruction and self-study routines can significantly enhance students' speaking skills.

Moreover, increasing exposure to native English speech through online platforms, exchange programs, or guest lectures can help students internalize accurate speech patterns. Faculty support, including positive reinforcement and personalized feedback, plays a critical role in building students' confidence and motivation to improve.

Conclusions

This study highlights the pressing need for systemic changes in Pakistan's educational approach to English language learning. By addressing the linguistic, psychological, and instructional barriers identified, educators and policymakers can create more effective and inclusive learning environments. Further research is necessary to explore innovative strategies, such as integrating artificial intelligence and culturally relevant materials, to tailor speaking instruction to the Pakistani context.

Ultimately, improving English speaking skills will not only enhance students' academic and professional opportunities but also empower them to engage confidently in a globalized world. With the right interventions, the challenges of speaking can be transformed into opportunities for growth and success.

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