## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A SYMBOL OF SOCIAL STATUS: EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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**ABSTRACT**

The present work focuses on the interconnection between the English language and social class and education in Pakistan. An exploratory concurrent mixed-methods design was used, where data was collected both quantitatively and qualitatively. The participants were 200 university students from two public universities in Pakistan by using a stratified random sampling technique. The findings reveal that the University students in Pakistan assign social status, job prospects and educational mobility to fluency of English. Most importantly the study stresses on the need to enhance English language teaching in Pakistani universities more especially in the perspective of globalization and internationalization. But nevertheless, the study shows that socio-economic status, cultural identification and learning process influence students' perception about the English language learning. Consequently, this study's findings have implications for language education policy and process in Pakistan through calling for equitable, and more integrated language education for university learners. In sum, the present research extends the knowledge about the interlinks between language, power and identity in the context of Pakistani society.

**Keywords:** English Language, Social Status, University Students, Perceptions, Pakistan

### Introduction

Language is an antecedent component of interaction which is also pertinent to social, cultural and economic domains. Education, business and global communication in Pakistan are evidence of the importance acceded to the English language in the country. However, there are issues concerning the use of English in Pakistan which are as follows; English is related with social status, power and privilege.

The relationship between language and social status is complex and multifaceted. Language can be a powerful symbol of social identity, and proficiency in a particular language can confer social status, prestige, and economic advantages. In Pakistan, English language proficiency is often seen as a key determinant of social status, career opportunities, and educational advancement. This perception is reinforced by the fact that English is the language of instruction in many Pakistani universities, and

proficiency in English is often a requirement for admission to top universities and job opportunities.

The significance of English language proficiency in Pakistan can be attributed to the country's colonial past and its current position in the global economy. During the British colonial era, English was imposed as the language of government, education, and administration, and it remained the language of power and privilege even after independence. Today, English continues to play a dominant role in Pakistan's education system, economy, and international relations. As a result, proficiency in English has become a highly valued commodity in Pakistani society, particularly among the educated elite.

This study aims to explore the perceptions of university students in Pakistan regarding the English language as a symbol of social status. The study seeks to investigate how university students in Pakistan perceive the importance of English language proficiency in determining social status, career opportunities, and educational advancement. The study also aims to examine the role of socio-economic background, cultural identity, and educational experiences in shaping students' perceptions of English language learning.

As such, this study seeks to add to the existing knowledge on social identity and language in a Pakistani context by analysing interconnections between language, social class and education. The recommendations generated from this research will inform language education policy and practice in Pakistani university, particularly for those students with multiple barriers to learning.

The rest of the remaining part of this article is structured as follows: The following section presents a literature review of language and social status with specific reference to Pakistan. This is followed by information on technique used in conducting the research in the study. The outcome of the research is then described and the conclusions of this research are then discussed in relation to the policy and practice of language education.

## Literature Review

### Language and Social Identity

Language is a normative component of human existence wherever, and it embraces a critical part of the individual's social-cultural-economic personality. Bourdieu (1991) has rightly stated that language also forms one of the types of symbolic capital through which individuals assert their relationship and status. With special reference to Pakistan, language has served a deep functional social and cultural identity especially in the post-colonial world.

English is an important second language in Pakistan in its usage in official and private sectors in Pakistan has a history which starts from colonial period. Dutch mean's that during this period English was enforced as a medium for conducting government business, education and administration, so it remained the language of those who wield power up to and after the attainment of independence was granted. Today, English maintains political influence in Pakistan's education, economy as well as in the foreign policies domain.

Making friends with Pakistan may be a little tricky because English, a worldwide lingua franca, has a rather uneasy and choppy relationship with Pakistan. In this period English Medium was adopted in government and educational institutions and the English remained language of power and aristocracy after independence. Today English remained the official language in the Pakistan for educational system, business and diplomatic relations.

This paper focuses on selected ESL Learner Concerns, that is, English Language Proficiency and Social Status. Multilingualism has been common in Pakistan specially in educated classes English language has been given the highest priority. Thus, knowledge of English language is considered as the factor influencing the social rank, opportunities to get the job, or achieve better results in study. This perception is supported by the fact that English is used in teaching in most of the Pakistani universities and fluency in English is a condition when applying for a scholarship in some of the better recognized universities and scarcity of job accommodations in Pakistani markets.

**Culture and Language Acquisition**

Cultural background in another aspect that defines the experiences and effects of learning a given language. Many of the factors which have been identified as influencing language learning and language use relate to learners' cultural selves; these may range from learners' perception of the value of language and, therefore, the value of efforts towards learning a language to learners' performance in the language that is being learned.

Therefore, with specific focus on Pakistan, culture has been seen to have large influence on language learning acquisition. Cultural factors such as Pakistani students' cultural identity affect their perceptions, use and attitudes towards the learning of English Language, motivational outlook towards learning English Language and language proficiency.

**Policies for languages and language planning in Pakistan**

This paper has shown that issues of language policy and planning in Pakistan are informed by the history, cultural and socio-economic factors. This paper has shown that the following factors have shaped language policy in the country; colonialism, nationalism and globalization.

English being one of the many languages that Pakistan adopted as media of instruction in school, business and diplomacy. However, the use of English has also been criticised particularly for exacerbating inequity and eradicating the linguistic diversity in the country.

**Language and power regarding the Pakistani controversy**

Language serves as a prerequisite to the creation and sustenance of the relationships as well as of bargaining of power relations. This paper is aimed at exploring how language has become significant in creating social identity especially in Pakistan in the post-colonial period.

There is evidence that English language has been regarded as language of power and dominance in society especially among the schooled generation of Pakistan. Fluency

in English is regarded as one of the decisive factors for social success and job or educational promotion.

## Language and Education in Pakistan

Education and language are the two important and sensitive issues of Pakistan. Trends, such as colonialism, nationalism and globalization have influenced the education systems of this country.

English language has been used in Pakistan education sector mainly at higher education level as an official language. However, the English-speaking culture has also been criticized for unfavourable effects that include reproduction of social injustice and non-recognition of bilingualism in the country.

## Pakistani Discourse and Social Justice: An Interdisciplinary Investigation

Approval and disapproval are perhaps the most conspicuous ways in which language is used to create and sustain relationships and control status. Language has always been an important factor in constructing social identity in Pakistan especially after the post-colonial period.

The English language has always been considered as a power language especially in the context of Pakistan especially among the literate class. Fluency in the English language is believed to be one of the hallmarks of the social class, success in careers and academic promotion.

However, English is also viewed as the language discriminating Social inequalities and eradicating the linguistic diversity of the country. The spread of English language is perceived as a threat to the nation's local languages and cultures.

## Pakistan and Multilingualism

Since language is a resource which may be employed to create and sustain interactional relationships as well as to regulate status relations, these subjects are best approached within the context of language. Language has also been used in Pakistan to define social profile more especially with the onset of post-colonial society.

English has been linked culturally to globalisation and the growth of the modern world in Pakistan. English it is considered as an ability that determines social status, the possibility of getting a job and advancing in the educational ladder.

Nonetheless, the use of English has also had its share of criticism where issues such as social justice, as well as the erasure of linguistic diversity in the country, has come under a lot of criticism. English has been viewed as negative as it has been perceived as the threat to the nation's indigenous languages and cultures.

## Methodology

## Research Design

The research in this work used both qualitative and quantitative research methodology in data collection and analysis. The study was conducted in the prospect of understanding Pakistani university students' attitude towards the English language as a status symbol.

### Participants

The target population of the present study involved 200 university students from two Pakistani public universities. The participants were recruited using a stratified random sampling technique because the targets to be reached were university students.

### Sampling Frame

The sampling universe comprised all the undergraduate students of the two public universities in Pakistan. The universities were selected according to their ranking, geographical location and the size of their population.

### Sample Size

The size of the sample used in the study was estimated and calculated using the formula for estimating sample size for a population. According to the formula, a sample size of 200 respondents was considered to be adequate to fulfill the research goals.

### Survey Questionnaire

Questionnaire was adopted as the instrument for data collection amongst the participants. The questions that were asked formed a set of twenty questions although some of these questions where close-ended questionnaires while others where more of the ordinarily one or two word answer questions. The questionnaire was divided into four sections:

### Demographic Information

This section collected data in relation to the participant's age, gender, socio- economic status, and education.

### About English Language Learning

This section aimed at eliciting the participants' view on the English language learning pertaining to their attitude towards English language instruction, the motivation to learn English and perceived utility of English language to them.

### Socio-Economic Background

My involvement in this section was to collect data on participants' socio economic status such as family income, parents' education, and availability of English language material at home.

### Educational Experiences

In this part the data that was collected concerned the participants' educational background, their acquisition of the English language and their performance, and their goals for the future occupations.

### Survey Administration

In this study, the survey questionnaire was distributed to the participants using online and offline techniques. The online survey was located in a secure webpage and each of the participants received a personal link to the survey. The offline survey was face-to-face and in completing the survey the participants received a paper-based questionnaire.

**Pilot Testing**

All the variables included in survey questionnaires were pre-tested with a small sample of participants to confirm that the items measured were clear, simple, and related to the objectives of the study.

**In-Depth Interviews**

In the subsequent stage, 20 participants were purposively chosen from the survey sample and asked to participate in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed at broadening the understanding of the participants' views on learning English and their learning process of this language.

**Interview Protocol**

The interview questions included 10 questions; the intention of the questions was to elicit long and reflective answers from the participants. The questions were divided into three sections:

**The perceived study of the English language**

This section collected the participants' self-reported data with regard to the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards language acquisition particularly with reference to english language education and training, perceived reasons towards the acquisition of the english language as well as perceived gains in being able to master the english language.

**Accounting for Learning English**

This section aimed at collecting preliminary data concerning the participants' learning English: the received education in English; academic performance; and the future occupation.

**Future Plans and Aspirations**

In this section participants' expectations from the future were obtained and included their career paths, intended academic, and the overall career prognosis expectation.

**Interview Administration**

The interviews took place face-to-face and at the end of the interviews, participants were offered a document with the interview questions. The interviews were conducted using a digital voice recorder and all of the recorded interviews were transcribed orally.

**Data Collection**

Self-administered questionnaires and interviews were used in the study. The survey questionnaire comprised of 20 questions both in the format of closed ended questions and open ended questions. The particular questionnaire aimed at listening to what participants think about the process of learning English language, their SES status as well as their schooling.

**Survey Questionnaire**

The survey questionnaire was divided into four sections:

1. Demographic information: Information about them and their age, gender, socio-economic status and educational experience was obtained in this section.

2. Perceptions of English language learning: This section collected data from the participants regarding their belief systems on English language learning and their

feelings towards English language teaching, their interest and reasons for learning English and the benefits accrued by being able to speak English fluently.

3. Socio-economic background: This section aimed at collecting data on participants' socio-economic status such as family income, education level of parents and availability of English language material in participants' household.

4. Educational experiences: This section collected data concerning the participants' educational history including their English language learning, performance levels and future employment goals.

## In-Depth Interviews

Blind structured, pretested questionnaires were also administered on one hundred participants, out of which twenty participants were further contacted for in-depth interviews. The interviews were more structured to elicit further information from the participants, concerning their personal attitudes to English language acquisition and further, their experience in the process of learning English.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed in the quantitative data analysis. The survey data was analysed by descriptive statistics and the inferential statistics including correlation and regression analysis. The interview data was analyzed qualitatively and involved looking for patterns or themes within the data collected.

## Participants

Approximately, 200 university students from two mainstream public universities in Pakistan were included in the study. This technique was useful in the selection of the participants in that it allowed for a random choice of the university student population. The survey questionnaire and interviews were conducted and the data collected was analyzed using both frequency counts and content analysis.

## Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively through use of descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency and percentage was employed and used in this study to establish the participants' profile and their impression about learning the English language.

The inferential statistics were correlation analysis and regression analysis in order to find out the relationships between the participants' views on English language learning and on their socio-economic status, their educational history and their career choice.

## Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis in which the data was read through thoroughly and patterns and themes were coded out. The themes and patterns of the study were done through the process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

The following qualitative themes emerged from the analysis; participants' view on teaching and learning English: English and promotion; English as_outfitting social identity; Socio-economics and access to ELL resources.

**Descriptive Findings of the Survey Questionnaire**

The survey questionnaire data analysis results are presented below:

**Demographic Characteristics**

Participants' demographic details are presented in Table 1 below.

| Subcategory of the Demographic Characteristic Headings | Frequency | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | | |
| 18-20 | 80 | 40% |
| 21-23 | 60 | 30% |
| 24-26 | 40 | 20% |
| 27-29 | 20 | 10% |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 100 | 50% |
| Female | 100 | 50% |

Beliefs about the Learning of English as a Foreign Language

Concerning English language learning as perceived by the participants, details are provided in Table 2 below.

| Power | Perception | Frequency | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The findings show that mastery of the English language greatly enhances career mobility | 180 | 90% |
| ELD influences ones social orientation- She also argued that English Language determines social self-organization. | 120 | 60% |
| Social – economic status of individuals has an impact on the use of English language resources available. | 100 | 50% |

Findings from the Triangulated Analysis of In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interview data analysis results are presented below:

**Themes**

The themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews are presented below:

- Various findings as to why English language could be a factor that affects one's career mobility.

**- SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY AND THE ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING**

This paper examines the role of socio-economic background on availability of English Language Resources.

**Patterns**

The patterns that emerged from the in-depth interviews are presented below:

Participants from higher socio economic status indicated that they had more resources in English.

Fear among participants that they came from disadvantaged background made it difficult for them to access English language resources

Respondents with positive attitude towards learning English language also had higher level of English language proficiency

**Results**

The results of the study are presented below:

Survey Questionnaire Results

The findings of the survey questionnaire are displayed in table 1 below.

| Constant | .........................| ......... | ......... |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | | |
| 18-20 | 80 | 40% |
| 21-23 | 60 | 30% |
| 24-26 | 40 | 20% |
| 27-29 | 20 | 10% |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 100 | 50% |
| Female | 100 | 50% |

The participants' perceptions of English language learning are presented in Table 2.

| Perception | Frequency | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| English language proficiency is important for career advancement | 180 | 90% |
| English language instruction shapes social identity | 120 | 60% |
| Socio-economic background affects access to English language resources | 100 | 50% |

**In-Depth Interview Results**

The in-depth interview results are presented below:

**Themes**

The themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews are presented below:

1. The importance of English language proficiency for career advancement: In response all participants agreed English language skills are necessary if they are to gain promotions in their respective work places. They also stated that it is mandatory to look for a job with English language proficiency and said people who have English language proficiency have higher chances of getting a job.

2. The role of English language instruction in shaping social identity: More respondents insisted that language especially English language is used much to promote social identity. In their study, they found out that those who are good speakers of English are always associate with modernity, sophistication, education and well-being.

3. The impact of socio-economic background on access to English language resources: Few participants also indicated that socio economic factors play a role in determining the availability of English language materials. They claimed that children from the well-off families are in a position to acquire English language books, private tutors and language institute more easily than those from the not-so-well-off families.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study suggest that English language is important in Pakistan regarding employment and identity status. The study also renders the influence of social origin on availability of English language learning materials.

**Socioeducational policif implications for language education**

This study has implications for language education policy in Pakistan. From the findings it would be recommended that English language tuition should be simplified and made affordable to all pupils irrespective of the Income group. This can be offered through affordable or free English classes, work on creating language learning materials within an accessible website and mobile applications.

**Implication of study for Language Teachers**

For that purpose, the current study also has specific implications for language teachers in Pakistan. The findings point to the fact that language teachers should consider the socio economic status of their students when teaching them. This can mean going over and beyond what is expected of you as a teacher in offering support to students from low income families and also in teaching students using cultures that do not offend.

**Conclusion**

Finally, the study emphasizes on English as a relevant factor to the life and opportunities in Pakistan, for career mobility and identity. Thus, the study also discovers how the socio-economic status affects acquisition of English language resources. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the findings of the present study can contribute to language education policy in Pakistan specially the educators and planner working on language teacher.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Make English language instruction more accessible and affordable: Free and quality education should be implemented to enable students from the low and middle income earning families to afford to learn English.

2. Develop online resources and language learning apps: The specific recommendations include creating online sources and language learning applications to help students and offer practice more practice time.

3. Provide additional support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds: Language teachers should dedicate more time and resources to students given less attention, and usually this encompasses offering more time for tutoring and or mentoring.

4. Use inclusive and culturally sensitive teaching methods: The socio-economic status of a students and cultural beliefs should be considered by language teachers when in class.

5. Conduct further research on the impact of socio-economic background on access to English language resources: Studies should be done to find out how socio-economic state influences the accessibility of English language materials, creation of language learning applications and online resources.

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