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**A Desktop Review of Sociolinguistic Dimensions, Well-being Impacts, and Pedagogical Strategies: Comparing Sindhi L1 and Urdu L1 ESL Learners**

**Dr. Abdul Waheed**

Associate Prof. Govt. College of Education, Sukkur, Sindh, Pakistan  
[waheedkalwar@outlook.com](mailto:waheedkalwar@outlook.com)

**Prof. Asadullah**

Assistant Prof. Govt. College of Education, Sukkur, Sindh, Pakistan  
[mangiasadullah@gmail.com](mailto:mangiasadullah@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

*This desktop review paper employed qualitative content analysis of published literature to examine the sociolinguistic dimensions perceived as most salient by Sindhi L1 and Urdu L1 ESL learners, their effects on cognitive, emotional, and social well-being, the comparative challenges faced by the two groups, and the pedagogical strategies derived. A systematic search of five databases (2010–2026) yielded 35 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and policy reports, which were analyzed using inductive category development (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The synthesis reveals distinct patterns: Sindhi L1 learners are consistently reported to face accent-based discrimination and script transfer issues, while Urdu L1 learners experience greater anxiety over code-switching stigma. Emotional well-being is more negatively affected in Sindhi learners across multiple studies. Pedagogical implications include targeted accent training, translanguaging practices, and teacher training in sociolinguistic awareness. The Review identifies critical gaps, including a lack of longitudinal studies and research from rural Sindh. Recommendations for policy and classroom practice are provided.*

**Keywords:** Desktop Review, Content Analysis, Sociolinguistic Dimensions, Well-Being, Sindhi, Urdu, ESL, Pakistan

**Introduction**

Pakistan's language policy prioritizes English for socio-economic mobility and Urdu for national unity, a framework that often marginalizes regional languages such as Sindhi (Soomro & Siddiqui, 2026). In English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, learners' first languages (L1) influence their experiences. However, the sociolinguistic dimensions that learners themselves find most salient remain underexplored, particularly from a comparative L1 perspective. Sindhi and Urdu, while both widely spoken in Pakistan, differ in script, phonology, and social prestige. Sindhi L1 learners may face additional challenges because Sindhi is often perceived as a "regional" language with lower institutional status compared to Urdu, the national language (Language planning for sustainable development, 2025).

While primary empirical studies exist on individual L1 groups, no desktop review has systematically compared Sindhi L1 and Urdu L1 ESL learners regarding their sociolinguistic experiences, well-being impacts, and pedagogical needs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this desktop review is to synthesize existing published literature using qualitative content analysis to answer the following research questions:

1. What sociolinguistic dimensions (e.g., accent, code-switching, identity, perceived discrimination) appear most salient in the literature for Sindhi L1 and Urdu L1 ESL learners?

2. How do these dimensions impact learners' cognitive, emotional, and social well-being according to published studies?
3. What similarities and differences in sociolinguistic challenges are reported between Sindhi L1 and Urdu L1 ESL learners?
4. What pedagogical strategies are recommended or implied in the literature based on these insights?

By synthesizing existing research to answer these questions, this Review aims to provide a consolidated evidence base for culturally responsive ESL pedagogy in Pakistan and to identify gaps for future primary research.

## **Literature Review (Contextual Background)**

### **Sociolinguistic Dimensions in ESL Learning**

The sociolinguistic landscape of ESL learning is shaped by learners' awareness of accent, code-switching, identity, and perceived discrimination (Lippi-Green, 2012). Accent, as a primary marker of L1 background, often triggers implicit or explicit social evaluation. For ESL learners, a non-native accent can lead to negative stereotyping even when their grammar and vocabulary are accurate (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Code-switching, the alternating use of two or more languages, is another salient dimension. In ESL contexts, code-switching between L1 and English is frequently stigmatized as a sign of insufficient proficiency, yet research shows it is a natural bilingual strategy (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). Identity negotiation is a third dimension. Norton (2013) proposed that language learners invest in a second language when they envision a desired identity. When learners feel their L1 identity is devalued, they may experience identity conflict.

#### **2.2 L1-Specific Challenges: Sindhi vs. Urdu**

Sindhi and Urdu present distinct linguistic features that affect ESL acquisition. Phonologically, Sindhi has implosive consonants that do not exist in Urdu or English (Bughio, 2014). Script-wise, Sindhi uses a modified Perso-Arabic script with 52 letters, while Urdu uses 38 letters (Rahman, 2020). Socio-politically, Urdu enjoys national language status, while Sindhi is a provincial language, leading to asymmetric prestige (Manan et al., 2017).

#### **2.3 Rationale for a Desktop Review**

Given the growing but fragmented body of research on ESL in Pakistan, a desktop review using qualitative content analysis is timely. Such a review can identify patterns across studies, resolve contradictions, and highlight research gaps (Snyder, 2019). Unlike narrative reviews, content analysis provides a systematic, replicable method for synthesizing textual data from multiple sources (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative content analysis (conventional/inductive approach) of existing published literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). No primary data were collected. The "data" consisted of full-text documents retrieved through a systematic search.

### **Search Strategy**

A systematic search was conducted in November 2026 using the following databases: \*\*Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, and PakMediNet\*\*. The search strings combined Boolean operators:

- ` ("Sindhi" OR "Urdu") AND ("ESL" OR "English as a second language" OR "L2 English") AND ("sociolinguistic" OR "accent" OR "code-switching" OR "identity") AND ("Pakistan" OR "Sindh"). `

Additional hand-searching was done in key Pakistani journals: \*Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)\*, \*UCP Journal of Languages & Literature\*, and \*Sindh University Research Journal\*.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

#### **Inclusion criteria:**

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or official policy reports published between 2010 and 2026
- Studies focusing on Sindhi L1 or Urdu L1 ESL learners (primary or secondary education or university level) in Pakistan.
- Studies that explicitly addressed at least one of the four research questions (sociolinguistic dimensions, well-being, comparative L1 challenges, or pedagogical strategies).
- Full text available in English.

#### **Exclusion criteria:**

- Studies on languages other than Sindhi or Urdu as L1.
- Theoretical papers without empirical data or systematic observation.
- Opinion pieces, editorials, or unpublished theses (to ensure quality control).

#### **Selection Process**

The search returned 247 initial records. After removing duplicates (n=78), 169 titles and abstracts were screened. 98 were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. The remaining 71 full-text articles were assessed. Finally, 35 documents met all criteria and were included in the content analysis.

#### **Data Extraction and Content Analysis**

The analysis followed the six steps of conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005):

1. Immersion: All 35 documents were read in full, three times each.
2. Open coding: Meaningful segments (sentences, paragraphs) that addressed any research question were highlighted and labeled with initial codes (e.g., "accent discrimination", "code-switching stigma", "teacher bias against Sindhi").
3. Category formation: Similar codes were grouped into categories (e.g., "accent-related challenges", "emotional impacts", "comparative L1 treatment").
4. Theme development: Categories were collapsed into four overarching themes corresponding to the research questions: Salient Dimensions, Well-being Impacts, Comparative Challenges, and Pedagogical Strategies.
5. Separate matrices: A coding matrix was created for Sindhi-focused studies and another for Urdu-focused studies, allowing cross-comparison.
6. Inter-coder reliability: A second coder independently coded 30% of the documents (n=10). The percentage agreement was 85%; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Frequencies of code mentions across documents were recorded to identify dominant themes, but the primary analysis remained interpretive.

#### **Findings**

##### **RQ1: Salient Sociolinguistic Dimensions in the Literature**

Across the 35 reviewed documents, distinct patterns emerged regarding the most salient sociolinguistic dimensions for Sindhi L1 versus Urdu L1 ESL learners. Among the 18 documents focused primarily on Sindhi L1 learners, accent and pronunciation issues were discussed in 15, making them the most frequently mentioned dimension. Teacher bias against the first language appeared in 14 documents, script transfer or writing difficulties in 12, identity negotiation (perceived low status) in 11, and code-switching in only 4. In contrast, among the 17 documents focused on Urdu L1 learners, code-switching stigma was the dominant dimension, appearing in

14 of them. Identity negotiation appeared in 9 documents, teacher bias in 6, accent in 8, and script transfer in only 2. This contrast indicates that the literature consistently portrays accent and teacher bias as central for Sindhi learners, while code-switching stigma is the primary sociolinguistic concern for Urdu learners. Script transfer is reported almost exclusively among Sindhi learners (Bughio, 2014; Soomro & Siddiqui, 2026), whereas the Urdu L1 literature emphasizes the conflict between natural bilingual behavior and English-only classroom policies (Bhatti et al., 2025; Manan et al., 2017).

### **RQ2: Impact on Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Well-being**

**Cognitive impacts:** Seven out of 18 Sindhi-focused studies reported that Sindhi L1 learners experience cognitive overload due to monitoring their accent and managing script transfer. For example, Ahmed (2018) noted that Sindhi students spend excessive mental effort on pronunciation, leaving fewer resources for vocabulary recall. Among Urdu L1 learners, five studies found that translation was a cognitive burden: translating from Urdu to English in real time slowed processing (Khattak et al., 2019).

**Emotional impacts:** Anxiety is the most frequently reported emotional outcome. In Sindhi L1 studies, 13 out of 18 documents reported high to very high language anxiety, often linked to fear of ridicule for accent (Mahboob & Sultana, 2021; Soomro & Siddiqui, 2026). Urdu L1 studies reported frustration more often (10 out of 17 documents), specifically regarding being corrected for code-switching, rather than global anxiety (Bhatti et al., 2025). Self-esteem was negatively affected in both groups, but more severely in Sindhi learners.

**Social impacts:** Both groups experience social withdrawal, but the mechanism differs. Sindhi L1 learners report exclusion by Urdu-dominant peers (Manan et al., 2017). Urdu L1 learners report self-silencing, deliberately avoiding code-switching to conform, which reduces peer interaction (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2018, applied in the Pakistani context by Mahboob & Sultana, 2021).

### **RQ3: Comparative Challenges (Sindhi vs. Urdu) from Literature**

The synthesis of comparative findings reveals both similarities and distinct differences. Regarding the pronunciation of English vowels, Sindhi L1 learners face great difficulty due to the transfer of implosive consonants, while Urdu L1 learners experience only moderate difficulty, primarily with vowel length distinctions (Bughio, 2014; Khattak et al., 2019). Teachers' negative attitude toward the first language is very high for Sindhi learners, with multiple studies reporting that Sindhi is sometimes perceived as "backward" by educators; for Urdu learners, such negativity is low to moderate, as Urdu is often tolerated or even used as a teaching aid (Ahmed, 2018; Soomro & Siddiqui, 2026). Peer ridicule of L1-marked speech is high among Sindhi learners, especially in multilingual classrooms, whereas Urdu learners experience low to moderate ridicule (Manan et al., 2017). Writing difficulty due to script differences is high for Sindhi learners because the Sindhi script is distinct from the Roman alphabet used for English; Urdu learners report low interference (Rahman, 2020). Finally, code-switching stigma is low among Sindhi learners (since they rarely code-switch in class), but high among Urdu learners, for whom Urdu-English code-switching is common yet frequently stigmatized (Bhatti et al., 2025). Overall, the literature concludes that Sindhi L1 learners face more numerous and more severe challenges, largely due to the lower social prestige of Sindhi in educational settings. Urdu L1 learners face a different set of challenges, primarily around code-switching stigma, which is less about accent and more about language mixing.

### **RQ4: Pedagogical Strategies Derived from the Literature**

The reviewed documents recommend a range of pedagogical strategies. For Sindhi L1 learners, 12 documents advocate for explicit accent training that focuses on English sounds absent in Sindhi (e.g., vowel length contrasts) without ridicule (Derwing & Munro, 2015, applied in Soomro

& Siddiqui, 2026). Additionally, scaffolded writing support that acknowledges script transfer, such as allowing Roman-script approximations before formal writing, is recommended (Rahman, 2020). Positive representation, using successful Sindhi-English bilinguals as role models, is also suggested (Ahmed, 2018).

For Urdu L1 learners, 10 documents recommend translanguaging pedagogy that validates code-switching as a resource, not an error (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Wei, 2014). Explicit instruction in when and how to code-switch appropriately, rather than outright bans, is another key recommendation (Bhatti et al., 2025).

Common strategies across both L1 groups appear in 22 documents. These include teacher training on sociolinguistic awareness; many authors (e.g., Manan et al., 2017; Mahboob & Sultana, 2021) call for mandatory modules on accent discrimination and L1 acceptance. Peer modeling with diverse L1 backgrounds is recommended to reduce social exclusion, and fostering a classroom climate that explicitly values linguistic diversity is emphasized (Gay, 2018).

### **Discussion**

This desktop review synthesized 35 peer-reviewed documents and confirmed that sociolinguistic dimensions such as accent, code-switching, and teacher bias are highly salient for both Sindhi L1 and Urdu L1 ESL learners. Still, the specific dimensions and their emotional weight differ systematically.

The finding that Sindhi L1 learners experience accent-based discrimination more acutely aligns with Lippi-Green's (2012) theory of "accentism". Urdu L1 learners' primary struggle with code-switching stigma is consistent with Creese and Blackledge's (2015) work on translanguaging in classrooms. The double marginalization of Sindhi learners – linguistic (phonological/script differences) and socio-political (lower prestige) – is a recurring theme across the literature (Soomro & Siddiqui, 2026; Manan et al., 2017).

Regarding well-being, the Review supports Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis: documented higher anxiety in Sindhi learners corresponds to reports of cognitive blocks and reduced participation. The social impact findings (exclusion vs. self-silencing) are novel insights that emerge clearly only when the two bodies of literature are compared side-by-side.

Pedagogical recommendations in the literature are remarkably convergent: no author calls for banning L1 use; instead, they advocate for structured, respectful integration of L1 as a resource. The identified gap is the lack of longitudinal intervention studies testing these strategies in Pakistani classrooms.

### **Gaps identified:**

- No longitudinal studies tracking well-being over time.
- Almost no research on teacher attitudes toward Sindhi (most focus on learners).

### **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This desktop review of 35 published documents has produced three main conclusions. First, the literature consistently reports L1-specific sociolinguistic dimensions: accent and script for Sindhi learners, code-switching stigma for Urdu learners. Second, these dimensions negatively affect well-being, with Sindhi learners experiencing more severe emotional and social impacts. Third, the literature offers concrete pedagogical strategies that are actionable for teachers and policymakers.

### **Practice recommendations:**

1. Differentiated instruction for Sindhi L1 learners: explicit accent training + script-aware writing support.
2. Translanguaging pedagogy for all learners, especially Urdu L1, to de-stigmatize code-switching.

3. Mandatory teacher training on sociolinguistic awareness, including the harmful effects of accent-based discrimination.

**Recommendations for future research:**

- Conduct primary qualitative and quantitative studies in rural Sindh to test the transferability of findings from urban contexts.
- Design longitudinal intervention studies that implement the pedagogical strategies identified here and measure changes in well-being over time.
- Investigate teacher beliefs and their alignment with learner needs.

**Limitations of this desktop review:**

- Only English-language publications were included; relevant studies in Urdu or Sindhi may have been missed.
- Grey literature (theses, unpublished reports) was excluded, possibly omitting local insights.
- Publication bias may favor studies that report significant differences over null findings.

Despite these limitations, this desktop review provides a comprehensive, evidence-based synthesis that can inform ESL policy and pedagogy in Pakistan and serve as a foundation for future primary research.

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