Influence of L1 Pashto on English Speaking Proficiency among University Students

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Abstract

This research examines, in the academic setting of Riphah International University, how the first language, Pashto, influences students' proficiency in speaking English. No doubt, English is considered an important tool for success both academically and professionally; however, Pashto-speaking students face some specific challenges which result in an inability to achieve fluency in spoken English. This research investigates to what extent a Pashto linguistic background influences the acquisition of English-speaking proficiency. While earlier research looked at the general influence of L1 interference, limited studies have outlined the phonological and grammatical features of Pashto which may impede the process of acquiring English as a second language in private university settings. In return for this research gap, self-designed questionnaires with five-point Likert scale were distributed among undergraduate students, the data was analysed to find the pattern of language transfer regarding pronunciation, grammatical structure, sentence formation, etc. Results show that L1 Pashto has a regular interference impact on English speaking, specifically errors on tense usage and phonological errors. The present study extends the available literature on the linguistic problems of a bilingual learner and provides key lessons from the language instructors' points of view. It identifies the need for consideration of the learners' linguistic background in devising focused teaching strategies aimed at speaking English competence enhancement.

1. Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communicating but it is also a sign of identity, culture, and cognitive development. In a multilingual country such as Pakistan, with diverse languages such as Urdu, English, and others, the impact of L1 on English learning as a second language is a profound factor in language learning success. Among major regional languages, Pashto is widely spoken, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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and parts of Baluchistan. As English functions at the level of higher education and serves as an international lingua franca, understanding how Pashto speakers navigate English speaking challenges is essential for improving language pedagogy in Pakistan.

The phenomenon of L1 interference, more commonly known as language transfer, has been widely studied in SLA. Language transfer, according to Odlin (1989), is the occurrence of the rules or patterns of a learner's native language having a positive or negative influence on the use of a second language. Speaking proficiency here designates the learner's ability to speak appropriately, fluently, and intelligibly in spoken English. Pashto speakers have peculiar difficulties that are caused by the substantial phonological and syntactic differences between Pashto and English, such as misarticulation of fricative sounds, incorrect placement of stress, and inadvertent changes in sentence structure. Syed Sajjad Ali, Mahmood & Ahmad (2022) record that the Pashto speaking students mispronounce English frequently due to the fact that some English fricative consonants /f/, /v/, /z/, and /ʒ/ are either non-existent or are produced differently in Pashto.

Additionally, the grammatical structure of Pashto creates complications in the syntax and fluency of English. As mentioned by Saddiqa (2018), the students with Pashto as their L1 commit mistakes while speaking English in terms of article usage, verb tense, and structure of the sentences. All this happens due to the habit of direct translation and less real-life exposure to English in their routine life. In her paper, she also mentioned that the students from rural Pashto-speaking areas, particularly those who do not get frequent exposure to Urdu or English except at school, are relatively less confident and fluent compared to the one living in urban and bilingual/multilingual environments.

While there are a number of studies on L1 interference in language learning in Pakistan, most research has focused only on Urdu-speaking learners or general ESL challenges. In fact, few empirical studies specifically address the private university Pashto-speaking students with regard to their peculiar influence from their mother tongue on English speaking ability. This research gap indicates that such literature is required, focusing on the phonetic and structural influence of Pashto on English oral proficiency.

The present study, therefore, tries to fill this gap by exploring the influence of Pashto on the speaking proficiency of undergraduate students studying English at Riphah International University. The study aims at specifically determining the challenges in pronunciation, fluency, grammaticality, and confidence. A five-point Likert-scale-based structured questionnaire will be forwarded to 30 Pashto-speaking students to elicit quantifiable data regarding their experiences and difficulties.

The present work limits itself to students having Pashto as their first language and studies only the spoken English of the students. It does not evaluate reading, writing, or listening skills, and neither does it look into the role of Urdu or any other second language. The results are bound to be of immense use to language instructors, curriculum designers, and education policymakers for the purpose of devising more effective and inclusive language teaching strategies for the Pashto-speaking learner.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What pronunciation difficulties do Pashto speaking students face while speaking English due to L1 interference?
2. How does frequent code switching from Pashto to English affect speaking fluency among students at the university level?
3. What impact does Pashto phonology have on students' ability to produce English vowel and consonant sounds accurately?

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of L1 interference within SLA has long been addressed, and much attention has been given to describe how native languages' structures are transferred to learning English. Grasping this kind of influence is multi-potentially crucial in multilingual contexts, the likes of which include Pakistan, where Pashto is a predominantly spoken regional language. Pashto has some very distinctive phonological and syntactic features that often make learners of English as a second language face certain typical challenge.

Khan, Bashir, and Janjua (2017) investigated the pronunciation of English consonants, vowels, and diphthongs by Pashto speakers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study found that Pashto speakers find those English phonemes which are not present in their mother tongue, such as dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, difficult to pronounce; they substitute them with

some other phonemes, impacting intelligibility. This corroborates the general view that phonological differences between L1 and L2 impede the accurate pronunciation of the target language.

Moreover, Berzak, Malaviya, and Barzilay (2016) stressed the predictive power of contrastive analysis in calculating grammatical error distributions for ESL learners. Their typology-driven model suggests that structural differences between Pashto and English can lead to specific grammatical errors-misapplication of tense and article usage-common among Pashto-speaking English learners. According to the language transfer theory, learners transfer knowledge from their L1 during the acquisition process of L2 with facilitative and interfering effects. This language transfer is common in the case of Pashto-speaking students as code-switching practices in academic settings.

Muhammad Younas, Afzaal, and Uzma Noor (2020) studied code switching in university-level ESL teaching in Pakistan. The results show that code-switching can aid understanding in the process of learning; however, relying too much on this habit slows down the English language acquisition. This happens quite regularly among learners whose L1 is Pashto, as during communication in English, they frequently switch to their L1 syntactic structures. Along the same line of research, Khan, Tariq, and Shah (2020) investigated the code-switching pattern of Pashto–English bilinguals and reported insertion as the most frequent one, especially with nouns and non-finite verb forms.

Nawaz, Rehman, & Fatima (2023) examined the code switching among the ESL learners in Pakistan. The findings revealed that code switching can fill the gap in terms of language variety, along with the effect of reduced exposure to the target language, which might be obstructing the learning of English. The literature surveyed above has collectively revealed a complex effect of L1, the Pashto language, on speaking proficiency in English. The phonological difficulties, for instance, misarticulation of certain sounds in English, are further exacerbated by difficulties with grammatical transfer, particularly about the past tenses and use of articles. The phenomenon of code-switching has been introduced as a strategy, as well as a hindrance to smooth incorporation into English. Such studies are quite enlightening, but nevertheless, there is a research gap when it comes to Pashto-speaking students, particularly in the setting of a private university such as Riphah

International University. The research intends to fill the gap by providing targeted educational approaches based on the distinct language backgrounds of the said students within the university.

3. Research Methodology

This section explains how the research is carried out, as well as how the findings are checked for accuracy and reliability. This research is quantitative research because it attempts to gauge whether students' L1 language, which is Pashto, is different from their L2 language, Urdu, in how it affects students' English-speaking skills. The design of a methodology consists of a four-level structure, which comprises Participants, Instruments, Procedures, and Data Analysis.

3.1 Participants

This research has been conducted on a targeted population of 34 university students at Riphah International University, who were chosen through a purposeful sampling technique to include students who were actively engaged with the English language. The age range of the research participants is 18 to 25, with a total of 23 females and 11 males, who are multilingual learners because they are speaking two languages, L1=Pashto, L2=Urdu.

The students taking part in the research were studying English as a non-native language for more than five years, with a significant amount of coursework in departments that involved regular English communication, such as class discussions, assignments, and presentations. The academic environment offered a guaranteed English exposure, which is fitting for measuring the impact of L1, L2, and English-speaking skills.

The language proficiency level of the participants is assessed as intermediate to upper intermediate, as it is inferred from their performance in academics, class participation, and constant use of English language in presentations and homework. Although there has been no placement test, at least the language communicative proficiency has been established in the ongoing academic venture.

The choice of participants who move between Pashto, Urdu, and English daily really increases the relevance of this sample. The background of the participant, with a potential familiarity with English on an academic level, really constitutes a fitting subject for research on which

the cross-linguistic effects of the L1 language, Pashto, and L2 language, Urdu, on speaking skills in English can be researched. The age distribution of the population is described in the following table:

Age	Frequency	Percent
18-19	10	29.4
20-21	15	44.1
22-23	6	17.6
24-25	3	8.8
Total	34	100

3.2 Instruments

In this quantitative research, the dominant research tool that has been used is a structured research questionnaire aimed at studying the impact of L1, that is, Pashto, on English speaking skills in university students. The research questions that are in the research questionnaire are closed-ended, with a five-point Likert scale, which includes "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The data gathering tool used for the research is a questionnaire, which is divided into three major parts:

Demographic Data: This includes age, gender, department, and language background.

Language Use Patterns: examining the use and context of use of the Pashto, Urdu, and English languages by the participants.

Perceived Influence on English Speaking Proficiency: This is linked with the evaluation of the students' perceptions on the impact of their L1 on English speaking proficiency in terms of fluency, accuracy, and confidence. This tool has been adapted from the previous language proficiency tests, which were used in multilingual language research, to suit the bilingual language environment of the participants. Specifically, the tool has been modified to suit the impact of the Pashto language on English, which is considered the L1 language in the bilingual language environment of the participants. Sources are cited wherever necessary.

The pretest of the final administration of the questionnaire regarding clarity, coherence, and reliability was conducted on 34 students from diverse departments at Riphah International University, which

represents the same population on which the entire research is going to be carried out. Minor adjustments were made on some research questions based on the responses.

No personally identifiable information was obtained to ensure that ethical guidelines were followed. The participants were clearly told that taking part in the research was voluntary, with all the data being archived on a password-protected computer solely for research purposes.

3.3. Data Collection
The process of gathering data in this research is set to take place via a structured questionnaire, which has been posted online via Google Forms. In this case, a total of 34 respondents from different departments within Riphah International University were required to fill out the questionnaire. This method has been adopted to ensure that accessibility is considerate of the different schedules that the students may have. The data collection instrument was administered after the participants had been thoroughly briefed about the study's objectives and had been assured of respondent confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all individuals signed an informed consent form. No personal identifiers were requested or needed. The questionnaire is self-administered, with closed-ended components that used a five-point Likert-type scale. It takes, on average, 10 to 15 minutes to complete a questionnaire. In the online environment, respondents completed the questionnaires on paper forms. In the offline environment, a researcher is available to assist in responding to questions, making the entire process of data gathering easy.

4. Results and Discussion
The quantitative analysis used descriptive statistical methods, that is, frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, to describe the response of participants in different sections of the questionnaire. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 26 (2019). Descriptive statistics were used because this is a study based on interpreting the responses given by participants throughout different sections of the instrument.

The results focus on the identification of trends and patterns within the following areas:

Frequency and contexts of use for Pashto, Urdu and English

The presumed effect of L1 Pashto on the proficiency in speaking English, which refers to the fluency, accuracy, and confidence
Variation in responses according to academic level or branch of study

This statistical method allowed the researcher to obtain relevant results about how multilingual heritage affects students' skills in English speaking. The results provide a clear numerical overview that informs interpretation of the participants' perceptions and language practices.

Table 4.1: What language do students most commonly speak at home?

Language	Frequency	Percent
Pashto	22	64.7%
Urdu	10	29.4%
English	2	5.9%

The findings reveal that most participants (64.7%) identify Pashto as their main language spoken at home, indicating a marked prevalence of the first language in everyday life. This linguistic setting is likely to impact experiences pertaining to English learning and usage. Table 4.2 shows that Pashto is used everywhere, which constitutes a continued exposure to the mother tongue, therefore, it increases the likelihood of transferring Pashto phonological and syntactic features into English speech. Such cross-language transfer is likely to have consequences for the English speaking proficiency among university students.

Table 4.2: Do students believe their L1 (Pashto) affects their English pronunciation?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	24	70.6%
No	6	17.6%
Not Sure	4	11.8%

Most of the respondents, 70.6%, perceived that their first language influences their pronunciation, thus showing perceived phonological interference. From the table, 70.6% of the participants confirmed that L1 influences their pronunciation of English. This suggests that there is an awareness of phonetic interference, where the L1 phonemes may replace or distort the English phonemes due to differences in articulation habits. The results in this study are consistent with previous literature citing first language as a significant cause of difficulty in producing the speech of a second language.

Table 4.3: Which language do students feel more confident speaking in public?

Language	Frequency	Percent
Urdu	14	41.2%
English	11	32.4%
Pashto	9	26.5%

Urdu is found to be the most appropriate language for public speaking, and English comes second in that. The table also shows that students feel more confident speaking Urdu in public with 41.2% and English 32.4%, as compared to Pashto, which has a lower percentage of 26.5%. These findings show that despite Pashto being dominant in the home environment, students prefer using Urdu and English in formal or academic areas. This language switching might indicate adaptive strategies within multilingual settings.

Table 4.4: Do students mix Pashto or Urdu while speaking English?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Frequently	13	38.2%
Sometimes	15	44.1%
Rarely	4	11.8%
Never	2	5.9%

The first issue in using satellite TV implies that unless one has paid for it, access to channels is impossible. A high percentage of them, 82.3%, declared that they frequently or sometimes switch between Pashto or Urdu and English. According to the data in Table 4.4, 82.3% of students frequently or intermittently switch between Pashto or Urdu and English while conversing. This practice reflects both difficulties in word retrieval within English and a more general tendency to fall back onto more familiar linguistic constructions as a way of communicating. It also suggests that multilingual skills can sometimes mask a deeper lack of proficiency in English.

Table 4.5: What is the most difficult aspect of speaking English?

Aspect	Frequency	Percent
Pronunciation	15	44.1%
Vocabulary	9	26.5%
Fluency	6	17.6%
Grammar	4	11.8%

The most reported problem is related to pronunciation, which aligns with the effect of the learner's L1 phonological system. The results show that pronunciation is the most problematic aspect of English speaking at 44.1%, followed by vocabulary and fluency. This supports the argument that phonological interference from Pashto lies at the heart of the problems students face with spoken English.

Table 4. 6: What language is used during classroom presentations?

Language	Frequency	Percent
English only	10	29.4%
English mixed Urdu	18	52.9%
Urdu only	4	11.8%
Pashto	2	5.9%

Most of the students in the classroom use a code-mixed English–Urdu discourse, while the pure use of English remains minimal. For instance, according to Table 4.6, 52.9% of the students conduct their classroom presentations in English–Urdu, while only 29.4% of them display English purely. Such a tendency indicates that code-mixing is used to express complex ideas, which may hinder complete immersion in English and consequently hold back the development of spoken language proficiency.

Table 4.7: Has Urdu helped bridge the gap between Pashto and English?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	21	61.8%
No	8	23.5%
Not Sure	5	14.7%

Most participants consider Urdu a facilitative intermediary language. As indicated by Table 4.7, 61.8% of respondents express their belief that Urdu helps in connecting the gap between Pashto and English. This outcome may indicate that Urdu is more structurally and phonetically proximate to English than Pashto; thus, it can be considered a transitional language that facilitates the acquisition of speech patterns in English.

Table 4.8: Do students struggle with English tenses while speaking?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	18	52.9%
Sometimes	10	29.4%
No	6	17.6%

Most of the participants consider Urdu as a facilitative intermediary language. According to the findings, 52.9% of respondents face difficulties in tense usage while speaking English. The grammatical problem can be attributed to tense structure dissimilarities between Pashto and English verb which may create confusion and speech inaccuracies.

Table 4.9: Do students feel hesitant speaking English in academic settings?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	20	58.8%
No	7	20.6%
Sometimes	7	20.6%

Fully 58.8% are hesitant to speak English in academic settings, a result that could be due to a lack of practice, fear of judgment, or anxiety over accent-issues that are known to affect L2 speaking confidence.

Table 4.10: Do students practice English speaking at home?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	9	26.5%
No	25	73.5%

Lack of practice at home may be one of the reasons for reduced fluency and lower confidence levels. The table shows that only 26.5% of the students practice speaking English at home, meaning that few opportunities are left to support their English skills outside of the formal academy. This lacuna in practice may be a contributing factor to reduced fluency and limited vocabulary recall during spontaneous conversations.

Table 4.11: What are students' preferred methods to improve English speaking?

Method	Frequency	Percent
Watching English movies	14	41.2%
Reading a lot from books	7	20.6%
Speaking with Friends	8	23.5%
Using Language apps	5	14.7%

Multimedia exposure is the most favoured strategy for language improvement. Students reported watching English movies (41.2%) and speaking with friends (23.5%) as effective methods for improving speaking skills. These informal practices help increase exposure to authentic language and provide models for pronunciation and usage.

Table 4.12: Do students think their Pashto accent influences their English?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	23	67.6%
No	6	17.6%
Not sure	5	14.7%

More than two-thirds feel their L1 accent affects English articulation. It reveals that 67.6% believe their Pashto accent affects their English pronunciation. This supports the view that native phonetic patterns interfere with the articulation of English sounds, especially when L1 and L2 sound systems differ significantly

Table 4.13: Which English skill is most difficult for students?

Skill	Frequency	Percent
Speaking	13	38.2%
Listening	5	14.7%
Reading	6	17.6%
Writing	10	29.4%

Speaking is singled out as the most difficult skill, supporting directly the core issue that this research has tried to focus on. In this regard, the results show that speaking, at 38.2%, is the most problematic area of English compared to writing, reading, and listening. This finding reinforces the necessity of prioritizing oral communication training, particularly for students with a strong L1 background.

Table 4.14: Does thinking in Pashto delay English speech?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	19	55.9%
No	9	26.5%
Sometimes	6	17.6%

Most respondents perceive that internal translation hampers their English speech production. More precisely, 55.9% of the students reported that thinking in Pashto or Urdu delays their English verbal articulation. It means that cognitive translation processes impede speech fluency and students have not achieved so far, the spontaneous thought in English.

Table 4.15: Which language is preferred in group discussions?

Language	Frequency	Percent
English only	10	29.4%
English mixed with Urdu	17	50.0%
Urdu only	5	14.7%
Pashto	2	5.9%

Bilingualism is the prevalent characteristic in group discussion situations, where about half of the respondents use Urdu along with English. Data reported in Table X show that 50% of the students prefer a mixed English–Urdu mode for group discussions while 29.4% use only English. This finding highlights the importance of code-mixing within academic discourse, which represents both a comfort zone as well as a constraint regarding full immersion in English.

Table 4.16: Have students been corrected for pronunciation due to Pashto influence?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	21	61..8%
No	8	23.5%
I don't remember	5	14.7%

The data on pronunciation show that 61.8% of students have been corrected because of influence of Pashto. This high percentage shows that the presence of accent is perceived and conveyed to others.

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the influence of L1 Pashto on English speaking proficiency among university students at Riphah International University. The results showed that L1 Pashto influences the learners' English speech significantly, especially in pronunciation, fluency, and grammar. Common patterns of interference were found in pronunciation, such as the substitution of English fricatives with Pashto cognates, and repetition of code-switching, revealing the deepness in L1 influence. Even with these findings being relevant to the field of second language acquisition, several limitations should be considered. The sample comes from only one institution, and the data is mostly based on self-reports, which may not be fit to capture the real depth of spoken language performance. Future studies using larger and more diverse samples and mixed-methods designs, such as adding audio-based assessments, would better represent the phenomenon. The implications for pedagogic work are therefore considerable. Instructors need to adopt focused strategies that meet both specific phonetic and syntactic challenges for Pashto-speaking learners. Immersive, English-only environments, together with selective pronunciation training, would favourably impact spoken proficiency and help build up a greater sense of confidence among the learners.

Therefore, the study emphasizes the inclusion of the students' linguistic background when designing English language programs. By understanding and taking steps to address L1 Pashto influence, educators and institutions can ensure that there is successful language learning, leading to achievement of academic and professional success in a multilingual setting.

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