

Exploring university students' perceptions of the factors barring their English-speaking skills in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract:

This study examined students' perceptions of the factors barring their English-speaking skills. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire from the students of the English and Education departments studying in different semesters at the University of Malakand Pakistan. Data were analyzed using various statistical tools such as frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation, and independent samples t-test. The results showed a positive attitude of students (both male and female) toward developing English-speaking skills as the grand mean score was 3.54, higher than the mid-point of 3.0 on the five-point Likert scale. Further, the results showed no significant difference in students' perceptions of studying in the different departments ($p=0.066>0.05$) and semesters ($p=0.083>0.05$) towards English-speaking skills. However, factors impeding the English-speaking skill of the students identified include students' background-related factors (grand mean score $2.36<3.0$), the current English communication environment ($p=0.005<0.05$), teaching methodology ($p=0.009<0.05$), and the examination system ($p=0.048<0.05$). This study concludes that the English-speaking skills of the students could be improved by focusing on the mentioned impeding factors.

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1. Introduction

Multilingualism has been in practice around the world as pidgins and creoles have been created for effective communication (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). English is an international language associated with advancement in science, technology, trade, commerce, politics, and mass media communication (Sarwar *et al.*, 2012; Zughoul, 2003). It implies that English is a window to the globe because it provides a perspective of the different developments going across the world (Elbashir, 2017), and provides up-to-date information in all areas of human growth and activity (Zughoul, 2003).

The use of the English language in British India as a Pidgin and Creole by the traders on the coastal lines which were later declared the official language (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). Great Britain ruled one-fourth of the world, and therefore the regions which remained under its reign implemented English as an official language. The influence of the English language is still dominant in these regions, including Pakistan. Pakistan holds both English and Urdu as the official and institutional languages. Parveen and Mehmood (2013) documented that eleven percent of the population uses English as a language in Pakistan.

The acquisition of English as a second language has become an increasing necessity, especially in countries like Pakistan, where English is the official and declared second language. It is not only a status symbol and power but is also a definite source of career progression and job attainment (Mueser & Cook, 2012). The government of Pakistan has taken several initiatives for the promotion of the English language. However, the implementation of these is yet to be done due to the lack of a uniform and adequate educational framework (Shamim & Rashid, 2019), and the dearth of skilled teachers (Jadoon *et al.*, 2020). Thus, students at all levels in Pakistan face difficulties in learning English as a second language (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). Further, since the significance of English is a well-established fact at all levels in Pakistan, however, it is still considered a difficult subject of study in rural regions compared to urban (Bangash *et al.*, 2021).

The study of Farooq *et al.* (2011) noted that students, family, school, and peer groups are the main factors directly influencing the learning of English. Particularly, in rural settings, the promotion of the English language has become difficult because of many reasons entailing social or cultural barriers and the lack of an adequate environment (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, students from rural backgrounds studying in rural settings show poorer results in the subject of English compared to those from urban areas (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). Teachers in Pakistan provide some teaching in writing and reading abilities at the basic level, but these skills are not taught in the same way at the secondary level. School education in many rural regions of Pakistan is given in native languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, and so on, with little emphasis placed on learning and utilizing English (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). This research, therefore, intends to identify all reported problems in learning and speaking English language skills among students at Malakand University.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the variables impeding the English-speaking skills of students. The findings of this study would be useful in pointing out the issues as well as suggesting alternative ways to overcome issues pertaining to the acquisition of English speaking in the education system of Pakistan. The objectives of the study were: a) examine the perceptions of university students on barriers to learning English speaking skills, b) compare the perceptions of barriers to learning English-speaking skills based on gender, and c) compare the perceptions of university students on barriers to learning semester-wise.

1.1. Hypotheses of the study

The following research hypotheses were put forward for this study:

- H₀₁. Gender has no effect on the perceptions of university students regarding developing English-speaking skills.
- H₀₂. Department has no effect on the perceptions of university students regarding developing English-speaking skills.
- H₀₃. The semester has no effect on the perceptions of university students regarding developing English-speaking skills.

2. Literature review

Teaching a language should begin with oral presentation since it may greatly add to the development of reading and writing abilities, both of which are dependent on spoken language (Brown, 1994). Speaking is the process of creating and communicating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols in various settings. Brown (1994) and Burns and Joyce (1997) describe speaking as an interactive process of meaning creation that comprises information production, reception, and processing. Bygate (1987) defines speaking as the creation of auditory signals in order to elicit a variety of verbal replies from listeners. It is considered as systematically blending sounds to produce meaningful phrases.

Speaking is basically a utilitarian act. It is a skill that is either active or productive. We may deduce from these two definitions that speaking is an interaction between two or more individuals. When persons who interact can comprehend one another, provided they have achieved good speaking activity. Any contact between a teacher and a student is an apparent example of a speaking activity. The instructor should have strong speaking skills during the engagement since s/he is responsible for ensuring that all students grasp the content through his/her speech. Tarigan (1993) describes speaking as a language skill that is better developed in childhood, which is created by listening skills and is taught at that time. Speaking is a productive, real-time aural/oral talent (Bailey, 2005).

It is real-time because the other interlocutor is waiting for the speaker to respond right then, and there is no way for the speaker to modify his response as he could in writing. Because the

language is aimed outward, it is productive. It is auditory because the reaction is linked to the input, which is frequently received orally, and it is oral because the speech is delivered orally. Trudgill (1992) proposes the following processes: (i) a collection of thoughts, (ii) organizing them in the optimal sequence, and (iii) selecting the language for communicating with others. Learners put these skills into practice in their native tongue and confront their audience with confidence. These practices will also benefit them while using a foreign language. However, this study posits that in the context of Pakistan, English being the medium of instruction in the educational system and the official language, both teachers and students face trouble in speaking English and expressing their thoughts in it.

Several factors contribute to difficulties in English speaking as a foreign language for students (Ur, 1996). However, the feeling of inhibition is the most prominent factor (Ur, 1996). It implies that students are concerned about making mistakes, are afraid, and are just bashful (Ur, 1996). Many variables create difficulties in English speaking, such as the background and nature of students, poor teaching techniques, the curriculum, and the surroundings (Ahmed, 2015; Bashir *et al.*, 2011; Bilal *et al.*, 2013; Karim, 2012; Tariq *et al.*, 2013). For example, if the students lack language competency, they will be unable to maintain the discussion. Some students are unmotivated to communicate in English (Ur, 1996). Similarly, fluent English-speaking of students is affected by a lack of large vocabulary, poor grammar, and pronunciation skills, and the fear of making mistakes (Salera *et al.*, 2020; Ur, 1996). Since students seldom practice speaking English officially or even informally with their peers, feel shame and guilt when perplexed to put together words to form a decent phrase or discourse (Bashir *et al.*, 2011; Bowen, 2005; Alam & Ashrafuzzaman, 2018). Furthermore, something spoken, or something told is connected to self-confidence (He & Chen, 2010). It becomes the most important element in influencing students' speaking skills and makes a significant impact on speaking skills.

Human communication is complicated (Harmer, 1991; Gebhard, 2006). It is used to convey something or transfer information, they require clear communication. Speakers use language to achieve some objectives. For effective communication, speakers should be both listeners and speakers at the same time. University students in Pakistan require assistance in developing their English hearing, reading, and writing abilities (Kanwal & Khurshid, 2012). Furthermore, the current English language course material and teaching techniques do not improve the speaking skills of the students. The present English medium of instruction does not properly address the issues pertinent to oral communication. However, there have been many strategies (see, e.g., Bailey, 2005; Goh, 2007) developed to improve speaking abilities through syllabus design, teaching principles, and speech evaluation. Trent (2009) argues that one of the numerous factors obstructing English speaking skills is a lack of confidence and worry about making mistakes.

Cotter (2007) opines that students learn to utilize English in the classroom. However, they should also be involved in learning about how language works. They should be engaged in thinking about many elements of language, creating a common vocabulary for discussing

language, and applying this knowledge to critically assess texts in terms of effectiveness, meaning, and correctness (Cotter, 2007). Someone who speaks well would understand when to employ certain grammatical points (Cotter, 2007). Backlund (1990, cited in Elbashir, 2017) distinguishes three types of information that impact the efficiency of oral communication: social knowledge, self-knowledge, and content knowledge. If any of these are poor, certainly spoken communication will be hampered (Backlund, 1990, cited in Elbashir, 2017). Further, issues that impede oral communication include: dominating the conversation, utilizing incorrect loudness and pitch, making too much small chat, ignoring someone, and continuously interrupting others (Backlund, 1990).

Bashiruddin (2003), in a study on how to enhance students' oral communication skills, revealed that the causes of students' communication weaknesses include unskilled English language Teachers (ELTs), the major impediment to teaching English in Pakistan. Rama *et al.* (2007), in a research study at a Singapore primary school called "Jurong" found that the utilization of language games could enhance speaking skills during English courses. In the study, students were divided into an experimental group that used a communicative method with language games to improve speaking skills and a control group that used a teacher-centered method with real-life activities, including the necessary vocabulary to perform a conversation. Hamzah and Ting (2009) performed a qualitative and action research study on the success of employing group work in teaching speaking in an English classroom in Malaysia. The study's findings demonstrated excitement for group work activities and competency in spoken language because they felt safe expressing themselves in small groups, avoiding worry about speaking in another language.

Kanwal and Khurshid (2012) investigated university students' challenges in learning English language skills. They found that university students, in general, require further assistance in developing their English hearing, reading, and writing abilities. Furthermore, their study identified that university students are dissatisfied with the current English language course material and teaching techniques. Their study mentions that numerous elements influence pupils' ability to speak English fluently. For example, they are concerned about making blunders when speaking; they are unable to communicate and express themselves effectively or sufficiently due to a lack of enough relevant language; shyness and nervousness cause students to be hesitant to communicate in English; they are afraid to speak English in front of others because they are insecure about their own ability to communicate in English. It is suggested that the use of supportive words could help students overcome their worries, uneasiness, and dread (Kanwal & Khurshid, 2012).

Further, a pleasant mood and an appropriate environment may also assist pupils in speaking enthusiastically, correctly, and fluently (Ahmad, 2011). Research findings document that students are afraid to speak English and use their reading skills. It is suggested that the exercise section be enhanced, and exercises included to help students develop their reading, writing, and speaking abilities. Findings reveal that many students still prefer to write in their local

languages (Urdu, Punjabi, or Pashto), thus in order to enhance literary writing abilities, students might be required to compose poetry or essays on a regular basis to overcome writing apprehension (Coleman, 2010; Khan, 2013).

Research studies on second language learners reported concerns about feeling inexpressive in the target language when learning to speak a second language (Elbashir, 2017; Brown, 2004; Ur, 1996; Krashen, 1982). This issue is always seen as an impediment to communication in the target language (Ur, 1996). Usually, students struggle to make mistakes when learning English as a second language (Hieu, 2011; Kurtus, 2001). A lack of English fluency complicates the learning process and has a detrimental impact on students' academic progress. Giving insufficient input on language rules, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, can result in poor production of fluency in oral communication (Thornbury, 2005; Nunan, 1999). Similarly, committing mistakes and pauses can cause hesitation on the part of second-language speakers (Kurtus, 2011). Research documents that verbal fluency is associated with and influenced by the components of oral competency, namely grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Elbashir, 2017). Similarly, Thornbury (2005) argues that the ability to produce fluent oral communication is reliant on students' understanding of the target language's grammar. However, Moges (2009) believe that it is dependent on vocabulary, while Richard (2006) thinks it is connected to pronunciation.

Fluency in the language is important for impactful communication (Nunan, 1999). Since English is the most widely spoken language and has acquired the status of a global language, therefore it serves as a second language for individuals who acquire it after their native tongue and as a foreign language for those who relocate from their home nation to another for the purpose of study or residence (Westrup & Baker, 2003). In this sense, increasing oral fluency in English is one of the most difficult challenges in learning it as a second language. This is especially true in countries like Pakistan, where learners communicate in their mother tongue and have little or no contact with second-language speakers outside of the classroom. Linguists assume that language is formed in the same way that habits are formed, so it is learned via usage and practice (Ur, 2000). Despite the fact that English is heavily utilized in educational contexts in Pakistan, students have extremely limited comprehension and exposure to English within their institutions (Bangash *et al.*, 2021). Resultantly, they struggle to put their ideas into correct words when they use English to convey their views and therefore face speech riddled full of errors and pauses (Bangash *et al.*, 2012). Usually, poor grammar and vocabulary are significantly linked with pauses owing to hesitation and word repetition among students while speaking in English (Nunan, 1999).

Overall, research on English as foreign language documents numerous elements that influence students' ability to speak English fluently (see, e.g., Elbashir, 2017). For example, students are often concerned about making blunders when speaking. They are also unable to communicate effectively or sufficiently due to a lack of enough relevant language vocabulary (Nunan, 1999). Another reason that causes students to be hesitant to communicate in English is their shyness

and nervousness (Kanwal & Khurshid, 2012). They are afraid to speak English in front of others because they are insecure about their own ability to communicate in English (Kanwal & Khurshid, 2012). As a result, it is critical to use supportive words to help students overcome their worries, uneasiness, and dread (Nunan, 1999). A pleasant mood and an appropriate environment may also assist pupils in speaking enthusiastically, correctly, and fluently (Ohata, 2005). The present study, in light of the above-mentioned literature, intends to identify factors impeding the English-speaking abilities of the students of University of Malakand, Chakdara, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

3. Methodology of the study

This study used quantitative methodology. Quantitative research involves collecting data to test hypotheses or to answer questions about public opinions on an issue (Gay, 2015). Since the nature of the study was to explore the perception of the students and then compare the perceptions of different groups, the quantitative survey method seemed appropriate. The data collection consisted of the following processes:

3.1. Sampling of the study

The population of this study consisted of 301 (161 males and 140 female) BS students of the department of English (158 students, out of which 82 males and 76 females) and the Education (143 students, out of which 79 males and 64 females), at the University of Malakand. In order to get an equal number of students (same ratio of male and female) from both the departments, 40 percent of students from both the departments were selected i.e., 40% of 301 is 120, so 60 (30 male and 30 female) students were selected from each the Department of Education and the department of English. Further, 20 students (10 males and 10 females) from the third, fifth, and seventh semesters from the English and Education departments were selected as study participants. The selection of study samples was drawn through the use of a convenient sampling technique. This was based on Creswell's (2012) views that researchers often use the convenience sampling technique and select samples from a population they think can yield insightful and relevant information.

3.2. Research instrument

A questionnaire was used as a research instrument to collect data from the selected samples. The instrument was based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree as follows: 1) Strongly Agree, 2) Agree, 3) Undecided, 4) Disagree, and 5) Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire was prepared in light of related literature and piloted before administering it to the participants. The questionnaire consisted of 9 main variables/main constructs (main theme questions). Each main theme variable/question had sub-variable/sub-theme questions, shown in table-1 in the analysis section.

3.3. Validity and reliability

For the initial pilot testing of the questionnaire, 10 students were selected. These students were not included in the sample. The pilot study helped to omit irrelevant questions/variables because it was important for the improvement of the questionnaire survey in yielding authentic and reliable data. For reliability purposes, Cronbach's alpha was used, which was found 0.717, showing a satisfactory level of the questionnaire.

3.4. Data collection

For the collection of data from selected respondents, permission was obtained from the heads/chairperson of each of the English and Education departments. Similarly, oral consent was sought from every student before administering the questionnaire.

3.5. Data analysis

The collected data were tabulated, analyzed, calculated, and interpreted in light of the objectives of the study. The tabulated data were analyzed through the use of SPSS. An Independent sample t-test was used for drawing conclusions and inferences, as shown in the proceeding section.

4. Results and analysis

Table-1 shows the main theme questions and sub-theme questions; the Likert scale calculation of responses for the sub-theme questions, its mean value (M), standard deviation (S.D); and the grand mean and grand standard deviation for each of the main theme questions. Further, if the mean value of any of the sub-theme questions is greater than that of the mid-point (3.0) on the five-point Likert scale, it will reflect a positive attitude/ perception. However, if the mean value of any of the sub-theme questions is lower than that of the mid-point (3.0) on the five-point Likert scale, it will reflect a negative attitude/perception. Similarly, if the grand mean calculation for any of the main theme questions is greater than 3.0, it will reflect a positive/perception. However, if the grand mean calculation for the main theme questions is lower than 3.0, it will reflect a negative attitude/perception.

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 1., are 3.79 and 0.425, showing a positive attitude/perception of the students toward English-speaking skills. Similarly, the mean calculation of the 8/out of 9 sub-theme questions is above 3.0, reflecting positive thoughts of the students toward the English-speaking skills such as that "English-speaking skills are necessary in the modern world" and "their desire to speak English fluently", showed the highest mean i.e., 4.71 and 4.65, form these sub-theme questions. However, the mean value of 1 out of 9 sub-theme questions pertaining to "I speak in English with my fellow students outside the classroom", was 2.61, showing a negative attitude. This implies that

students have trouble improving their English-speaking skills because they do not speak English with their fellow students outside the classroom environment.

Table-1: Main theme questions and the Mean and Standard Deviation of the sub-theme questions

S. No.	Main Theme Question	Sub-theme questions	1	2	3	4	5	M	S.D.
1	Students' perceptions of English-speaking skill	You desire to speak English fluently	01	02	04	24	89	4.65	0.706
		You think English speaking is a difficult task	10	31	24	44	11	3.13	1.149
		You like to speak English with others	01	0	07	36	76	4.55	0.684
		English-speaking skills are necessary in the modern world	01	01	03	22	93	4.71	0.640
		Those who can speak English well are respected in society	03	08	24	43	42	3.94	1.023
		You have a problem understanding a native speaker's speech	07	15	27	51	20	3.52	1.092
		Speaking skill is given enough attention in our classrooms	07	15	18	59	21	3.60	1.095
		Our teachers speak English in classrooms	03	24	29	46	18	3.43	1.051
		I speak in English with my fellow students outside the classroom	12	51	34	18	05	2.61	0.998
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								3.792	0.425
2	Students' perceptions regarding student background-related factors	Your family dislikes speaking English at home	36	43	19	16	06	2.28	1.174
		Your family members can speak English fluently	16	37	28	39	10	2.83	1.183
		English is commonly used in your family	18	48	26	22	06	2.58	1.104
		You feel hesitant while speaking English with family members	14	37	24	34	11	2.93	1.196
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								2.654	0.659
3	Students' perceptions regarding motivation for English speaking	Career advancement and promotions are effective driving factors contributing to motivation in English-speaking skills development.	04	03	18	58	37	4.01	0.930
		Limited time allocation to speaking skills leads to demotivation to speak in English	03	15	32	52	18	3.56	0.977
		Availability to switch to writing and sending e-mails instead of speaking with others lessens the motive to speak English	04	40	30	24	22	3.17	1.176
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								3.577	0.674
4	Students' perceptions	Lack of understanding of accurate pronunciation usually leads to communication problems	03	11	6	68	32	3.96	0.956
		Grammatical errors cause problems in speaking English with fellow students	06	23	21	47	23	3.48	1.152

	regarding oral communication	Lack of sufficient vocabulary in conversations often contributes to problems while speaking with fellows	02	06	14	53	45	4.11	0.915
		Incorrect intonations create confusion in oral communication	0	08	21	57	34	3.98	0.855
		Nervous feelings often cause avoidance in English communication	03	18	19	57	33	3.91	0.961
		A low level of self-esteem is one of the important factors contributing to anxiety while speaking in English	03	13	25	43	36	3.80	1.066
		Lack of proper practice in English speaking leads to discomfort while speaking English.	01	05	15	55	44	4.13	0.849
		Shyness is the cause of oral communication avoidance with fellow students.	03	11	12	50	44	4.01	1.033
		Formal English communication with friends creates stress and anxiety	15	44	22	25	14	2.99	2.217
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								3.818	0.552
5	Students' perceptions regarding environmental factors	Lack of English-speaking opportunities inside the classroom leads to poor speaking performance	03	04	10	48	55	4.23	0.923
		The technology available for teaching and learning speaking skills is available in our classrooms	13	37	16	35	19	3.08	1.294
		English speaking is used most of the time at university	13	31	26	32	18	3.09	1.250
		You don't like to speak English because people will laugh at you.	32	27	19	25	17	2.73	1.419
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								3.285	0.690
6	Students' perceptions regarding teaching methodology	The traditional grammar translational method does nothing to improve English speaking skills	05	28	29	37	21	3.34	1.141
		The methods used for teaching English are faulty in our classrooms.	06	32	24	43	15	3.24	1.130
		Teachers do not focus on developing English-speaking skills	11	51	18	22	18	2.88	1.254
		You do not understand the medium of instruction used by teachers in the classroom	16	58	26	14	06	2.47	1.028
		The accent of the teachers is understandable to the whole class.	04	14	15	47	40	3.88	1.104
		A teacher gives instruction in easy and understandable language.	01	07	17	49	46	4.10	0.911
		English is taught as a subject, not as a language	10	21	13	38	38	3.61	1.318
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								3.358	0.517
7	Students' perceptions regarding	Participation in activities is important for improving speaking skills	01	0	01	41	77	4.61	0.589
		Teachers allow you to practice speaking English in the classroom	11	08	14	46	41	3.82	1.237

	opportunities for practices	You get the opportunity to English-speaking practice in the classroom	06	15	12	44	43	3.86	1.183
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								4.094	0.800
8	Students' perceptions regarding the examination system	Speaking skills is not the focus of our examination system	11	20	21	33	35	3.51	1.316
		There should be a tool to assess speaking skill	02	09	14	43	52	4.12	0.997
		Speaking skills should be assessed as practice in the examination	09	16	15	27	53	3.83	1.330
Grand mean and grand standard deviation values								3.816	0.861

Note: 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree), 5 (Strongly Agree)

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 2. are 2.65 and 0.65, showing a negative perception of the students regarding their background-related factors hindering their English-speaking skills. Furthermore, the mean calculation of all 4 sub-theme questions was found to be lower than 3.0, indicating that students feel hesitant to speak English with family members because their family members either dislike English or do not commonly speak English because they are not fluent in it. This purports that the education level of the family members, parents in particular, and the use of the English language by the family members in routine conversation can improve the English-speaking skills of the students.

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 3. are 3.57 and 0.67, showing a positive perception of the students regarding their motivation towards English-speaking skills. Similarly, the mean calculation of all 3 sub-theme questions was found to be higher than 3.0, indicating that students were well aware of the fact that good English-speaking skills can be of great help in future career advancement and promotions. It was in this sense that they agreed that English-speaking skills could be enhanced by allocating more time to English-speaking.

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 4., are 3.81 and 0.55, showing a positive perception of the students toward oral communication, considered important for improving their English-speaking skills. Similarly, the mean calculation of 8 out of 9 sub-theme questions is above 3.0, depicting factors hindering the oral communication of students. These factors include insufficient vocabulary, lack of frequent practice in English speaking, inaccurate pronunciations and intonations, shyness and nervousness, low self-esteem in case of inaccurate English speaking, and grammatical errors. Thus students, because of the above-mentioned reasons, avoid “oral communication in English with friends because it could potentially create stress and anxiety.”

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 5., are 3.28 and 0.69, showing a positive perception of the students regarding the environmental factors hindering their English-speaking skills. For example, the mean calculation of the 3 out of 4 sub-theme questions is above 3.0, depicting that the lack of English-speaking opportunities and traditional teaching inside the classroom barricades their English-speaking skills. Further, incorrect

English speaking could be potentially embarrassing as it could make others ridicule and laugh at them, as “you don’t like to speak English because people will laugh at you”, had the lowest mean (2.73) as the majority of them agreed on this.

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 6., are 4.094 and 0.800, showing a positive perception of the students regarding the opportunities for the practice of English-speaking skills. For example, the mean calculation of all 3 sub-theme questions is above 3.0, indicating that participation and conversation in English during classroom activities are important for improving English-speaking skills (4.61). Also, the data indicates that students do get opportunities to participate in such classroom activities (3.83).

The grand mean and grand standard deviation calculations for theme no 7., are 3.81 and 0.86, showing a positive perception of the students regarding the examination system barricading their English-speaking skills. For example, the mean calculation of all 3 sub-theme questions is above 3.0, indicating that there should be a tool to assess the English-speaking skills of the students in exams (4.12) and that the present exam system focuses on written skills, not on the speaking skills (3.51) of the students. Thus, it can be argued that the assessment system does not focus on assessing the oral presentations (presentation in English), debate, and discussion but assess students on their written skills.

Table-2: Gender-wise comparison of the perception of students toward English speaking skills

S. No.	Construct	Gender	N	M	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	p
1	Attitude towards English-speaking	Male	60	3.7833	.38567	.04979	.238	.813
		Female	60	3.8019	.46474	.06000		
2	Student background-related factors	Male	60	2.5750	.73545	.09495	1.319	.190
		Female	60	2.7333	.56910	.07347		
3	Motivation for English speaking	Male	60	3.6333	.75340	.09726	.901	.369
		Female	60	3.5222	.58663	.07573		
4	Oral communication	Male	60	3.9574	.54321	.07013	2.832	.005
		Female	60	3.6796	.53114	.06857		
5	Environmental factors	Male	60	3.3875	.71371	.09214	1.632	.105
		Female	60	3.1833	.65559	.08464		
6	Teaching methodology	Male	60	3.4810	.52799	.06816	2.659	.009
		Female	60	3.2357	.48128	.06213		
7	Opportunities for Practices	Male	60	4.1000	.81949	.10580	.076	.940
		Female	60	4.0889	.78801	.10173		
8	Examination system	Male	59	3.8983	.89326	.11629	1.005	.317
		Female	60	3.7389	.83720	.10808		
Total		Male	60	3.60	.364	.047	1.750	0.083
		Female	60	3.49	.269	.034		

df= 118

level of significance= 0.05

Table-2 shows the difference in perception between the male and female students regarding their attitude toward English-speaking skills in different domains/main themes. If the value of p for any of the domains/constructs in the table ranging from 1 to 8 is found greater than the level of significance (0.05), it will show no significant difference between the perception of male and female students in that domain. However, it will show a significant difference if the value of p is lower than 0.05 for any of the mentioned domains.

The calculated data in the table shows that the value of p is greater than that of the level of significance (.05) for the domains ranging from serial no. 1 (attitude toward English speaking=0.813), serial no. 2 (students' background-related factors=0.190), serial no. 3 (motivation for English speaking=0.369), serial no. 5 (Environmental factors=0.105), serial no. 7 (Opportunities for Practices=0.940), and serial no. 8 (examination system=0.317). Therefore, there is no significant difference between the perceptions of male and female students in the above-mentioned domains.

On the contrary, the calculated data shows that the value of p is lower than that of the level of significance (.05) for the two domains mentioned in serial no. 4 (Oral communication=0.005), and serial no. 6 (Teaching methodology=0.009). Therefore, it shows a significant difference between the perceptions of males and females in these two domains. Further, the tendency of male students in these two domains is higher than that of female students.

Overall, the tabulated data in table-2 shows that the value of $p=0.083$. It implies that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of male and female students studying in various semesters in the two departments (English and Education) pertaining to their development of English-speaking skills. Thus, hypothesis H_{01} "Gender has no effect on the perceptions of university students regarding developing English speaking skills," has been accepted.

Table-3 depicts the semester-wise (within the same department and between the two departments of English and Education) comparison of the student's perceptions regarding their attitude towards English speaking in the different domains. If the value of p for any of the above-mentioned main domains/constructs is greater than the level of significance (0.05), it will show no significant difference between the perception of male and female students in that domain. However, it will show a significant difference if the value of p is lower than 0.05 for any of the main questions' domains.

The calculated data in table 3 shows that the value of p is greater than that of the level of significance (.05) for the domains mentioned in serial no. 1 (attitude toward English speaking, $p=0.530$), serial no. 2 (Students' background-related factors, $p=0.566$), serial no. 3 (Motivation for English speaking, $p=0.566$), serial no. 4 (Oral communication, $p=0.183$), serial no. 5 (Environmental factors, $p=0.200$), serial no. 6 (Teaching methodology, $p=0.075$), serial no. 7 (Opportunities for Practices, $p=0.613$), Therefore, no significant difference was found in the

perceptions of students (within the same department and between the two departments of English and Education) in the above-mentioned 7 domains.

Table-3: Department and semester-wise comparison of the student's perception regarding their development of English-speaking skills

S. No.	Domain	Groups' comparison	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	t	p
1	Attitude toward English speaking	Between Groups	.232	2	.116	.638	.530
		Within Groups	21.297	117	.182		
		Total	21.529	119			
2	Student background-related factors	Between Groups	.501	2	.251	.572	.566
		Within Groups	51.272	117	.438		
		Total	51.773	119			
3	Motivation for English speaking	Between Groups	2.902	2	1.451	3.312	.566
		Within Groups	51.261	117	.438		
		Total	54.163	119			
4	Oral Communication	Between Groups	1.040	2	.520	1.722	.183
		Within Groups	35.329	117	.302		
		Total	36.369	119			
5	Environmental factors	Between Groups	1.539	2	.769	1.633	.200
		Within Groups	55.123	117	.471		
		Total	56.662	119			
6	Teaching methodology	Between Groups	1.384	2	.692	2.652	.075
		Within Groups	30.534	117	.261		
		Total	31.918	119			
7	Opportunities for practices	Between Groups	.635	2	.318	.491	.613
		Within Groups	75.628	117	.646		
		Total	76.263	119			
8	Examination system	Between Groups	4.503	2	2.251	3.113	.048
		Within Groups	83.886	116	.723		
		Total	88.388	118			
Total		Between Groups	.565	2	.282	2.788	.066
		Within Groups	11.751	116	.101		
		Total	12.316	118			

However, the value of p was found lower in the domain mentioned in serial no. 8 (examination system, $p=0.048$), showing a significant difference in perceptions between the students of the same department and among the students of the two departments studying in various semesters of the same degree programs.

Overall, the tabulated data in table 3 shows that the value of p is 0.066. It means that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of students studying in various semesters in the two departments, such as English and Education. Thus, hypotheses H_{02} and H_{03} , "Department and the level of study (semester) have no effect on the perceptions of university students regarding developing English speaking skills", fail to reject.

5. Discussion and findings

The mean score for the perceptions of students towards English speaking, motivation for English speaking, oral communication, environmental factors, teaching methodology, opportunities for practices, and examination system were 3.79, 3.57, 3.81, 3.28, 3.35, 4.09, and 3.81, respectively which were found greater than that of mid-point (3.0) on the five-point Likert scale. Therefore, students believed they have a positive attitude towards developing English speaking skills. This implies that students are well aware of the significance of fluency in the English language. These findings are in line with the study of Westrup and Baker (2003), who identified that a student who has good fluency in English has not only a greater chance of getting further education on scholarship but can also find a job and can get quick promotion in his career.

On the contrary, the mean score for the perceptions of students regarding student background-related factors was (2.65), which was found less than that of the mid-point (3.0) on the five-point Likert scale. Therefore, English speaking is greatly affected by students' background-related factors. Other research studies also agree with these findings. For example, Bangash *et al.* (2021) found that students of rural backgrounds show poor results in the English subject. Similarly, a study by Farooq *et al.* (2011) depicts that students' family background, schooling, and peer group are the main factors directly influencing their learning of English. The hesitation to speak in English with the family members due to the lack of use of English by the family members, either because they do not like it or have no knowledge about English, were the main reasons impeding the improvement of the English-speaking skills of the students.

Further, our study found no significant difference between male and female students regarding their perceptions towards English speaking, student background-related factors, motivation for English speaking, environmental factors, opportunities for practices, examination system as with p-statistics scores were calculated 0.813, 1.90, 0.369, 0.105, 0.940, and 0.317 respectively at 0.05 level of significance. This implies that both male and female students have similar perceptions due to similar educational systems, similar curricula, and sociocultural environments. Razmjoo and Ghasemi (2011), in their study, intended to propose a model of speaking proficiency on the use of strategies, manifested that gender and level of proficiency do not influence students' speaking strategy.

On the contrary, a significant difference was found between the perceptions of male and female students regarding oral communication skills and teaching methodology with p-statistics scores of 0.005 and .009 at (0.05) level of significance. This implies that teaching methodology, which is by and large traditional, impedes the English-speaking skills of the students. Studies lay emphasis on the teaching strategy and cooperative or participatory approach in the learning of English communication skills. For example, Moges (2009) in a study on "Exploring the Methods of Teaching Speaking and Factors Affecting them," found that teachers used very traditional and limited methods and not focusing on the discussion, conversation, and

sometimes visuals and communicative games in teaching speaking. Similarly, Nunan (1989) identified that classroom interactions increase students' opportunity to practice speaking and help in improving their language ability. Likewise, Zhou (2009) carried out a research study on the "Cooperative Principle in Oral English Teaching" and identified that applying the cooperative principle to oral English teaching in the classroom helps develop students' competencies in English oral communication.

In another study, Yang (2010) found that optimization of the classroom setting and classroom instruction by creating a natural environment helps the students improve their speaking skills of English. It purports that the method of teaching and assessing speaking skills needs to be revisited and improved. In this regard, many scholars (see, e.g., Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1996; Brown, 1994) lay stress that communicative tasks in the classroom should be designed in a way that focuses on the learners with a desire to communicate, purpose to communicate and enjoy the freedom to use the language and then to encourage the learning of speaking skills. Thus, developing the speaking skills of students requires the designing of classroom activities allowing students to exchange ideas with each other, express their opinions, and develop learning strategies and communication skills for successful negotiation. However, applying these strategies requires teachers to know students' interests, have good competence in the foreign language, and implement new methodologies, techniques, and activities in the classroom. However, in Pakistan, teachers do not have either the motivation, interest or resources, or competencies to adopt these strategies.

The current study also intended to explore the difference in the perception of the students of the English and Education departments. Thus, the study found no significant difference between the perceptions of students of departments of Education and English towards English speaking, student background-related factors, motivation for English speaking, oral communication, environmental factors, teaching methodology, opportunities for practices with p-statistics scores 0.078, 0.301, 0.929, 0.342, 0.622, 0.822, and 0.706 respectively at 0.05 level of significance.

Similarly, we also aimed to know the differences in the perception of the students studying in different semesters. The study showed no significant difference between the perceptions of students studying in various semesters regarding their attitude towards English speaking, student background-related factors, motivation for English speaking, oral communication, environmental factors, teaching methodology, opportunities for practices with p-statistics scores 0.053, 0.566, 0.566, 0.183, 0.200, 0.075, and 0.613 respectively at 0.05 level of significance. However, the students of both the English and Education departments ($p < 0.029$) studying in various semesters ($p < 0.48$) showed a negative attitude towards the examinations system impeding the English-speaking skills of the students.

In Pakistan, the medium of instruction in the private school system is English, while in government schools, English is taught as a compulsory subject from grade one to the university

level. A study conducted by Bangash *et al.* (2021) highlights that English is considered a difficult subject of study in rural areas. Their study further documents that in the remote regions of Ex-FATA, the acquisition and promotion of the English language is very difficult because of the sociocultural barriers and the lack of skilled teachers, and an adequate environment. This study agrees with the findings of Shahzad *et al.* (2011) and Khushi and Talaat (2011) that the examination system in Pakistan is flawed, which mainly judges the memorization capabilities of the students less likely to assess the understanding and critical thinking skills of students. Further, English is taught as a subject and not as a language in the educational system of Pakistan (Bangash *et al.*, 2021), impeding the English-speaking skills of the students. The findings of our study regarding the flawed examination and assessment system impeding the English-speaking skills of the students have been endorsed by other studies. For example, Alam 2012 (cited in Sarwar *et al.*, 2014) noted that the Pakistani education system at all levels assesses only the written skills of the students. Further, Sarwar *et al.* (2014) mention that students alone work on mastering written skills because it alone ensures high grades of students. Consequently, students do not pay attention to learning English speaking skills because English Speaking Skills (ESL) has rarely been assessed. Therefore, the outgoing graduates of higher education in Pakistan are very weak in English speaking proficiency (Sarwar *et al.*, 2014).

Overall, our study endorses the findings of the study conducted by Sarwar *et al.* (2014) on the topic of “exploring the extent of improvement in English speaking skills among prospective teachers of one-year teacher education programs at three public sector universities in Pakistan” and noted that no significant improvement occurred in the English speaking skills of the prospective teachers during the teacher education program offered in departments of Education working in the public sector universities. We agree with Trent’s (2009) argument that besides other the numerous factors obstructing English speaking skills, the lack of confidence and worry about making mistakes bar non-native English students from communicating in English.

6. Conclusions

The mean score for the perceptions of students regarding challenges faced by university students in developing English-speaking skills is greater than that of the mid-point (3.0) on the five-point Likert scale, showing a positive attitude of both male and female students towards developing English-speaking skills. The study identified that gender, department or field of study, and the level of semesters have no significant effect on challenges faced by university students in developing English skills. However, the background socioeconomic factors pertaining to the educational status of the family members, parents, in particular, the lack of speaking English at home and outside the class due to low vocabulary, grammatical mistakes, public pressure in the shape of laughing at and ridicule by other, the flawed examination and assessment system impede the English-speaking skills of the students at all levels.

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