

## Oral Communication Problems of Higher Secondary School Students: A Case Study of EFL Classes In Swat, Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aimed at exploring students' oral communication problems in EFL classes of higher secondary schools in Swat, Pakistan. Using a qualitative case study design, the study attempted at answering the question: How do students and teachers perceive oral communication problems in EFL classes of higher secondary schools in Swat, Pakistan? Incorporating multiple-embedded case study design approach, through purposive sampling technique, 70 participants (60 students and ten teachers) from 10 higher secondary schools took part in the study. The study used semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews for gathering the data from the participants; thematic analysis approach was used for analyzing the data. Main findings of the study show that students faced several oral communication problems—linguistic problems, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and structure. This study carries pedagogical implications for teachers and teacher training institutions.*

### KEYWORDS

Oral communication, EFL classes, higher secondary schools, intermediate students, case study, qualitative research

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### INTRODUCTION

It is an established fact that EFL students face many difficulties in learning the four skills of the language. They face even more issues in learning to communicate in the target language. The nature of these problems and difficulties that students face in EFL classes differ from context to context. The context of the current study is Swat, Pakistan and the study sought to explore the oral communication problems of higher secondary school students in their EFL classes. Like many other parts of the world, English is taught as a foreign language in Swat Pakistan. However, contrary to the standard English language teaching practices, teachers primarily focus on the literary aspects of the text, whereas the linguistic aspect is ignored. In addition, teachers' main emphasis remains on the reading and writing skills, and listening and speaking skills are usually ignored. Standard English language teaching practices demand that the primary aim of learning a foreign language is to enable the students to achieve a level of communicative competence. However, the achievement of this objective is a challenge for students and teachers, as students fail to achieve the expected level of communicative competence even at the tertiary level. This challenge sets the background of the current study. To acquire the required amount of target language it is essential that individual is brought from language learning situation to language using situation, through rich experiences. They are provided adequate language input and ample opportunities to practice that language in order to become communicatively competent. As for as EFL learners in Swat Pakistan are concerned, classroom is the only authentic place for their learning. However, the time allotted for English classes is no way enough for developing all the four skills of the target language. In addition students get little exposed to the English satellite radio and T.V channels. The profuse use of Pashto as mother tongue inside and outside classroom is yet another issue. The use of mother tongue Pashto for delivering lecture in English language classes has put English language in the background and it has not been given the due significance as an international means of communication. Moreover, English is taught as a subject.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### SPEAKING AS A SKILL

One of the fundamental problems in foreign-language teaching is to prepare learners to use the language (Bygate, 1987, p.3). What preparations teachers do and how far they meet success depend on the teachers' aims and objectives. One point is obvious: to acquire the required speaking competence in a foreign language; it is essential to gain the knowledge of Grammar and Vocabulary to some extent. Therefore, a specific portion of a language course is exclusively incorporated for this purpose. Besides, there are other characteristics involved in speaking, and teachers need to know those features to make them



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part of their teaching. When a teacher wants to know whether or not a learner can communicate orally, it is essential to ask them to speak. Since they have to act on a certain amount of knowledge of Grammar and Vocabulary, it is here that the oral practice differentiates between knowledge about a language and skill in using it. This distinction plays a crucial role in the teaching of oral skills.

English enjoys the official language status in Pakistan. It is widely spoken in public and private sectors. Besides, it is used for communication purposes in the civil, military bureaucracy, judiciary, and advance level education institutions (Ali, 2010:05). The Quaid-e-Azam delivered his speech to the constituent assembly in English language that stamped the importance of this language in every body's mind (Mahboob, 2009:178). From that time onward English language has dominated the country's official discourse. Currently, the English language is essential for getting jobs in both public and private sectors. According to Rahman (2007) in all important jobs, whether State job, private or public low or high paid jobs, proficiency in English language is essential.

Likewise, Ali (2010) argues that English language proficiency takes one to power and prestige at national and international levels. Importantly, English language is used as a medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels in Pakistan. Moreover, it enjoys a relatively permanent status in the educational system of the country. Due to this consistency the country's youth is obsessed with English language which is essential for effective academic, professional, personal and social life (Lafford, 2004, Richard & Renandya, 2002). They attribute illustrious careers to English language. However, English according to Ali (2010) and Rahman (2007) is taught as subject in schools and colleges therefore students face several challenges in gaining English language skills mastery. Instead of having rich language using experiences they are left with language learning experiences. As a result students focus on exams and could not acquire the require language speaking ability (Rahman, 2007). Mansoor (2003) states that English language appeals so much to the public at large that one can see privately owned English language centers at both rural and urban areas. This is an unfortunate fact that despite studying English for several years students fail to speak in English language (Warsi, 2004).

The English language has received strong emphasis in Pakistan over the last decade (Government of Pakistan, 2009). Still, a considerable gap exists between the policy and practice (Coleman, 2010). Students' poor performance continues in all the skills, especially oral skills. Many researchers are interested in the field of the English Language and its learning. They wrote many pieces of research on the English language generally and oral communication problems and skills in particular. More specifically, many of these researches have focused on EFL/ESL learners and their oral communication problems. In this section, we discuss past studies on ESL/EFL (L2) oral communication problems.

## **ORAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS**

### **LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS**

#### ***Limited vocabulary***

Words to a language are just like bricks to the building. Bricks are used in the building's structure; similarly, vocabulary is used in structuring the speech. For proper oral communication in English language classes, students must have the appropriate vocabulary for different contexts. Several studies ( Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2000; Gu, 2003; Khan, 2007; Sato, 2008; El-Enen, 2011; Abdellah, 2011; Heriansyah, 2012; Gan, 2012; Hasan Sağlamel, 2013; Al' mashy, 2011; Alyan. 2013; Al-Hosni, 2014; Esmail, Ahmad & Noreen, 2015; Nawaz et al. 2015; Alqahtani, 2015; Hamuda and Shteivi, 2016; Maulana, Daud, and Heriansyah, 2016; Al-Roud, 2016; Yasemin, Hanife Bensen and Mustafa, 2020; Escudero, Cutiopala & Caisaguano, 2020) have reported that L2 lexical deficit is a major problem of oral communication in the target language. Students do not find the appropriate vocabulary for different contexts. They struggle to find words due to a lack of practice speaking and activating their vocabulary.

#### ***Pronunciation***

Another critical area of knowledge that a speaker of a language may know is phonology. Importantly, to sound natural, a better speaker of a language needs to know the sounds and produce those sounds because wrong pronunciation leads to misperception and causes communication problems. Poor pronunciation is one of the major problems that students face in oral communication in English language classes. Many scholars (Khan, 2007; ElEnen, 2011; Al mashy, 2011; Abdellah, 2011; Gan, 2012; Alyan, 2013; Hadijah, 2014; Kabir, 2014; Esmail, Ahmad & Noreen, 2015; Nawaz et al. 2015; Hamuda & Shteivi, 2016; Yanagi & Baker, 2016; Maulana, Daud, & Heriansyah, 2016; Hussain, Qureshi, & Abbasi, 2017; Yasemin, Hanife Bensen and Mustafa, 2020; Escudero, Cutiopala & Caisaguano, 2020) have reported that students generalize L1 sounds to L2 and thus create a mix-up. They claim that EFL/ESL learners fail to identify that certain letters are not pronounced in words. They also claim that these learners mispronounce certain words that lead to communication problems.

#### ***Grammar and Structure***

The more one is accurate; the more one is fluent. Accuracy and fluency are interrelated in the reception and production of a language. Weakness in grammar and structure is creating problems for students in oral communication in English language classes. Several studies (Khan, 2007; Khan, 2011; El-Enen, 2011; Alma' shy, 2011; Gan, 2012; Heriansyah, 2012; Paaki, 2013; Hadijah, 2014; Al-Hosni, 2014; Esmail, Ahmad & Noreen, 2015; Nawaz et al. 2015; Hamuda & Shteivi,

2016; Hussain, Qureshi, and Abbasi, 2017; Yasemin, Hanife Bensen and Mustafa, 2020; Escudero, Cutiopala & Caisaguano, 2020) have reported that EFL/ESL learners have severe problems with form and structure. They claim that these problems are embedded in tenses, voice, or narration.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study used Dornyei and Kormos (1998) framework. According to this framework, L2 oral communication problems crop up from four sources. The first source is the *L2 resource deficit*. They noted that these are those concerned with inadequate vocabulary, grammar, and phonology of L2. Problems may also occur due to *lack of practice* and continuous communication in L2, communicators may be non-automatized, resulting in tardiness in L2 production. Problems may also crop up due to the low output. We used this model for the current study because this model includes lower-order problems, i.e., linguistic and processing problems, and excludes higher-order problems, i.e., practical, content, and discursal problems. Since the current study aimed to study students' oral communication problems in English language classes of higher secondary schools in Swat, Pakistan therefore, we used this model that best fit the study. In addition this model is widely used in SLA research.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

From the previous experience as a Senior English Teacher in high schools in Swat and the present experience as a Subject Specialist teaching English to higher secondary classes, we observed that most of the English language learners in Swat are very weak in oral communication skills. A majority of the students do not have the basic skills to converse, interact with teachers, participate in pair work or group discussion in the classrooms or give formal presentations or speeches (Mohammed, 2007; Abdellah, 2011). Students rarely have a voice in the complex tapestry of classroom events. Even those students, who take part in classroom oral communication activities, have problems with their fluency and accuracy (Abdellah, 2011). Teachers mostly avoid using English in classrooms and bank on code-switching. They emphasize reading and writing skills, whereas they ignore listening and speaking, the most important skills (Sato, 2008). Students in Swat, to improve their English language oral communication skills and speaking muscle, must overcome these problems, which is why we investigate this problem.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

English language learning has remained a field of interest for many researchers. There has been a growing interest in English language communication problems in general and oral communication in particular (Abdellah, 2011). Researchers in this field have come up with different typologies. These include many scholars' works (e.g., Khan, 2007; Sato, 2008; El Enein, 2011; Abdellah, 2011 Paaki, 2013; Kabir, 2014). Nevertheless, these scholars have studied oral communication problems from competence perspectives. The current study is significant because it has studied oral communication skills problems from performance perspectives. The study is significant because, unlike previous studies, it has taken into account students' spoken scripts for substantiating participants' views about oral communication problems. This study is significant because, to the best of my knowledge, no researcher has conducted a study on students' oral communication problems in English as a Second Language or Foreign Language context in K.P. and Swat, Pakistan. All previous studies carried out are about students' competence and knowledge aspect. In contrast, this study will investigate both the competence (knowledge) and students' performance (skill) in the English language classes of higher secondary schools in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. Furthermore, it can be beneficial for teaching faculty as the research will highlight English language learners' problems in oral communication. Additionally, this study will suggest specific strategies and suggestions for coping with those problems. The current study will provide a guideline to policymakers to consider the current problems throughout Pakistan and modify the existing English Curriculum at the secondary level according to the present-day need, especially the inclusion of oral activities therein. The study will also be helpful for Pakistani English language learners to overcome their oral communication.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The following research question guided the study:

How do students and teachers perceive oral communication problems in EFL classes of higher secondary schools in Swat, Pakistan?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology adopted for the study entailed a qualitative case study design. Semi structured interviews were conducted with participants for data collection and thematic analysis approach was used for analyzing the data. Through interviews participants of the study shared their experiences of oral communication problems in EFL classes. Moreover teachers shared their experiences of how students faced problems in TL oral communication. All the interviews were conducted in Pashto. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim to English language. Participants' identity was concealed through the use of pseudonyms.

### Participants of the study

Sixty (60) students and 10 Subject Specialist teachers teaching English to higher secondary classes took part in the study. The students were those enrolled for the session 2018-19. The participant teachers were those who have been teaching in the sampled schools for the last two years. Since the study was qualitative case study therefore the students were sampled purposefully. We selected those students who faced oral communication problems with the help of teachers concerned.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Linguistic Problems

#### Vocabulary

Students and teachers participants perceived vocabulary to constitute a real problem in oral communication in the EFL classes. Students shared their experiences of limited vocabulary and commented.

*I have significant problems with vocabulary. I have the vocabulary, but it is not that much. Sometimes I feel at a loss for words*

It is evident from students' stance that they have serious issue with vocabulary. Limited vocabulary seems to be causing difficulties in the oral communication in the target language. One student perceived that the inadequate target language input resulted in weak aural oral skills,

*Our listening is so weak that one cannot carry the essential vocabulary. Few students will have this problem at a low level, but it is the majority of students' problems.*

Another student's perspective was that since the input is in mother tongue Pashto or national language Urdu therefore it looks amazing to have the vocabulary of the TL which he has not received either. Lack of adequate amount of TL input has been prevalent in many schools of Swat, KP, and Pakistan. The majority of the teachers deliver the lessons in L1 Pashto or national language Urdu on the plea that it is a requisite in exam therefore they switch codes or mix codes .

*The problem is not lack of vocabulary but passive vocabulary. Lesson delivery is in Pashto or Urdu, so how can I have the vocabulary and communicate orally in English. I find it hard to have words for different contexts. So lack of vocabulary is a significant problem I know those words which I have read in the text but have problems with general vocabulary.*

Teacher participants corroborated students' views. They perceived that students can express themselves in the TL but lack of vocabulary is an established problem in the EFL classes.

*Their vocabulary is not sufficient; though at this level students are able to express themselves but lack of vocabulary is a problem. Due to GTM, our students think in terms of Pashto and Urdu. As you know, English is L3 for us. That's why they cannot communicate orally. So lack of vocabulary is an issue Students' primary problem is a lack of vocabulary. If we look at their previous ten years of education English has not been focused, and mostly they have been taught in Pashto. So their vocabulary has not been adequately built up.*

These findings concur with the findings of the previous studies. Researchers (e.g. Khan, 2007; Sato, 2008; Abdellah, 2011; Al-Hosni; Alyan, 2013; Al-Roud, 2016; Yasemin, Hanife Bensen and Mustafa, 2020; Escudero, Cutiopala & Caisaguano, 2020) have reported similar findings that limited L2 lexical repertoire is the main problem that causes the interactants to pause during oral communication. Bakhtin, cited in Thornbury (2011), argues that a complete conversation between two persons is possible if they know words. In addition, Thornbury argues that words that the speakers use during conversation are productive vocabulary.

An interviewed student in Alyan (2013) expressed his views: "Sometimes I use three or four words to express one idea and this idea I can express by using one word." Likewise, an interviewed student in Al-Hosni (2014) said, "We want to speak, but we do not know the word". In addition, Sato (2008) reported that students could not find general lexical items, and they could not continue communication with interlocutors.

#### Grammar

The majority of the student participants shared their experiences of grammar in oral communication. They shared that weak grammar and structure constituted a significant problem in oral communication in the EFL classes.

*During oral communication, my main problem is the weak structure I am fragile in parts of speech and direct-indirect narration  
if one does not know the proper use of words, one cannot convey one's message accurately, Without grammar, the conversation takes place, but communication does not*

Teacher participants confirmed students' views. They were of the view that grammar and oral communication in the target language are related. Moreover, they stated that weak grammar and structure affected oral communication.

*It is essential because if one has vocabulary but does not know how to use them properly. Weak grammar is an issue because it affects oral communication.  
Grammar and speaking are much related to each other because when one speaks accurately, one speaks fluently. If students know grammar they can communicate orally.*

Conversely one teacher participant said that grammar does not play a crucial role in oral communication. He was of the opinion that a person can be well conversant in target language oral communication without knowhow of grammar. He added that grammar and structure may be essential for writing not speaking.

*Grammar is crucial for writing not oral communication because a person can have good oral communication skills without knowing grammar and structure.*

These findings are consistent with previous studies. Scholars (Alma' shy, 2011; El Enein, 2011; Paaki, 2013; Gan, 2012; Heriansyah, 2012; Hadijah, 2014; Esmail, Ahmad & Noreen, 2015; Hamuda & Shteivi, 2016; Hussain, Qureshi, and Abbasi, 2017; Khan, Pathan, and Ahmed, 2017; Yasemin, Hanife Bensen and Mustafa, 2020; Escudero, Cutiopala & Caisaguano, 2020) have reported that EFL/ESL learners have severe problems with form and structure. They claim that these problems are embedded in tenses, voice, or narration. Al-mashy (2011) explored that most students faced the problem of grammar in oral communication. One participant student in Almashy (2011) said, "I cannot use the English grammar correctly while speaking." In addition one interviewed teacher in Al-ma' shy (2011) stated, "Since our students are weak in English grammar, they cannot speak English accurately."

Dornyei and Kormos (1998) also argue that L2 learner speakers face problems due to surface structures, lack of knowledge about the lemma's grammatical form (the person, number, and tense). Some studies however reveal that grammar and structure is not such a significant hurdle in oral communication. Widdowson (1978) argues that the learner's involvement in the rich experiences of language rather than an overemphasis on the usage (knowledge, rules) matters.

### **Pronunciation**

Sharing their views about the English language's phonological aspect, most student participants reported that they faced pronunciation issues. One student said:

*I cannot differentiate between "p" and "f" sounds. I also have problems with words with silent letters like know; here, "k" is silent, but I pronounce it.  
In pronunciation, I have problems with "Ch" sometimes sounds as (ka) at other times as (6a).  
I cannot pronounce specific words correctly. I pronounced the word heard (herd) as heard (heard). I have severe problems with tricky words like {rhythm} (raythem).*

Since L1 and L2 have a difference in sound system, Mother tongue transfer is possible in this situation. Pashto is the mother tongue (L1) for the majority of people in Swat. Facing pronunciation problems is natural. In Swat, KP, Pakistan, people speak Pashto as their mother tongue, and there is no 'fa' sound in the Pashto language, so when students communicate in L2, they fail to differentiate between fa and pa sounds. Moreover, Pashto is a phonetic language, and all the letters and syllables in a word are expressly pronounced, but the same is not the case with the English language, where words are not pronounced as they are written. Al mashy (2011) explored that pronunciation is a problematic area of oral communication in the TL for learner speakers. One of the interviewed students expressed his views and said: *Pronouncing English words are very difficult for even my classmates and me.* These findings are also consistent with Dornyei and Kormos (1998), L2 learner speakers encounter problems due to a lack of a word's phonological form.

Teacher participants also reported that poor pronunciation is a problem in oral communication.

*The main problem with students' pronunciation is that they interfere with the mother tongue. E.g. there is "g" letter they generalized it both in the sounds "ja" and "ga."*

*They pronounce “l” in words like should, could, would, etc. and this problem is due to teachers’ wrong pronunciation because students follow their teachers.  
There are lots of problems with students’ pronunciation. Overall in Swat, there is the problem of (P) and (F).  
I do not think that pronunciation is a problem in students’ oral communication. If students practice oral communication, their pronunciation will get corrected automatically.*

Several studies (e.g., Abdellah, 2011; Alyan, 2013; Kabir, 2014; Yasemin, Hanife Bensen and Mustafa, 2020; Escudero, Cutiopala & Caisaguano, 2020) have also reported that students’ mispronunciation leads to a misperception of a message and results in the breakdown of the communication process. Likewise, Sato (2008) reported that students have more problems with the supra-segmental features than the segmental features. In his study, Al-ma ’shy (2011) reported that from teachers’ perspectives almost all secondary school students were weak concerning pronunciation. One interviewee said: *Without exaggeration, most Saudi students have pronunciation problems. Students cannot differentiate between English sounds such as /p/ and /b/.* Some participants said that students generalized the sounds of “G” for “J” and vice versa. These findings are also consistent with L2 oral communication problems and problem-solving mechanism model presented by Dornyei and Kormos (1998) based on Levelt’s (1989) and De Bot’s (1992) speech production models widely used in L2 oral communication research. According to Dornyei and Kormos (1998), L2 learner speakers encounter problems due to a lack of a word’s phonological form. Thus they find it difficult to articulate certain sounds; therefore, they avoid the problematic lexical item by employing the suggested lexical problem-solving mechanism called lexical code-switching suggested by Levelt’s (1989) speech production model.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed at investigating the facets that constitute problems in the EFL classes of higher secondary schools in Swat Pakistan. The data were collected through semi structured interviews with 60 students studying in higher secondary EFL classes. In addition, 10 Subject Specialist teachers were interviewed for in-depth analysis. Both the students’ and teachers’ data revealed that students faced Oral communication problems in EFL/ESL classes due to linguistic factors. Firstly, students did not have sufficient vocabulary to converse or interact in EFL classes. Secondly, they fail to form accurate sentences due to weak grammar and structure. Thirdly, students face issues with pronunciation as they fail to pronounce specific words or pronounce them with silent letters. These findings are acceptable since students in Swat Pakistan speak Pashto as their mother tongue which is phonetic language and very much different from English in form and structure. It is obvious that students will encounter a lot of nuances and hurdles in speaking the target language in the EFL classes.

## CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

**Rehmat Ali Mian** conceptualized the research idea during discussion with her supervisor, following which he designed the study, did literature review, gathered the data, analysed the findings and completed her doctoral studies by writing her research thesis. This paper has been drawn from the research thesis. **Dr. Syed Munir Ahmad**, being research supervisor of Rehmat Ali Mian, has helped, supported and guided the research scholar from conception to completion of her doctoral research studies. He has provided feedback, comments and suggestions on thesis draft manuscripts and has helped the scholar in refining this research paper.

## COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS:

It is **declare** that all authors don’t have any conflict of interest. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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