

The Politics of Language in Higher Education: Linguistic Hierarchies and Student Experiences in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: This research investigates how higher education in Pakistan shapes identity construction, academic confidence, and educational inequality through linguistic hierarchies. The study is a postcolonial sociolinguistics analysis based on the notion of linguistic capital of Bourdieu, and examines the role of English, Urdu, and other regional languages as unequal symbolic resources in university classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 university students who are multilingual using an interpretivist phenomenological design to explore their experiences. Results indicated that English is a marker of intelligence, prestige, and upward mobility, and that fluent speakers are visible and are given institutional legitimacy. Urdu served as a kind of lingua franca for peer communication and at the same time marginalizes non-Urdu speakers in some situations. Regional languages and students' cultural identity are not well represented in formal academic practices. Students of Urdu medium background face problems of language anxiety, self-doubt, and perceived lack of success in school, whereas English medium students are more confident in language and more engaged in school activities. Participants exercised agency through translanguaging, peer collaboration, and digital tools to navigate structural inequities. The study highlights students' voices to reveal the colonial nature of linguistic practices and institutional norms, and invites pedagogies that are linguistically inclusive and that view multilingual repertoires as intellectual resources. The results further inform the current debates on medium of instruction, identity, and equity issues in postcolonial multilingual settings.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic Hierarchies, Linguistic Capital, Multilingualism, Medium of Instruction, Identity Construction, Postcolonial Sociolinguistics

Introduction

After the partition of the Indian subcontinent from British rule, Pakistan came into being in 1947. Its national language is Urdu, while English, co-sanctioned due to the weight of colonial history, holds a considerable linguistic

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position and is used across many regional domains (Channa, 2017). During the British Raj, English was employed in public schools for official purposes; speaking English influenced personality and identity because it opened the doors to high-paying jobs and gave people prestige for being educated and capable (Shamim, 2008). Medium of instruction (MOI) is a persistent concern in Pakistan and across South Asia since independence, as Pakistan is a linguistically multifaceted country with 74 languages currently spoken or written (Simons & Charles, 2018; Baig & Ahmad, 2022). English was entrenched in Pakistan under British rule and in the context of power structures and social hierarchies that are still in effect in contemporary institutions of education in Pakistan (Amir, 2008). The Constitution of Pakistan 1973 has given Urdu and English as the official languages, but no rules are provided to protect indigenous languages. Simons & Charles (2018) reported that Urdu and English are the two main languages spoken in Pakistan. The prevalence of Urdu as the designated language and the dominant pedagogy of academic institutions has helped in the marginalisation of the regional languages. Additionally, there is increasing worry about the importance of English proficiency as a portal to international opportunity, and this concern is driving language endangerment for minority language learners (Gross et al., 2021).

A significant moment in establishing Euro-American-centric education in British India was Bentinck's English Education Act of 1835, which created a stratification between European and native knowledge systems. The British government sought to educate its subcontinental citizens in modern Western thought, aiming to create, in the words of Thomas Macaulay, "a class who may be mediators between us and the millions whom we oversee; an individual who have a color and blood of an Indian but English in their taste, perspective, virtuous and cognition" (Macaulay & Young, 1935, p. 359).

Ali (2018) noted that the global spread of English does not simply reflect communicative demand but also a deeper process of standardization that marginalizes local languages and their speakers. Indigenous languages are still at the lowest tier of the linguistic hierarchy and are only spoken in kinship groups, despite the National Education Policy (NEP, 2009) acknowledging their importance (Rahman, 2004; Hamid & Niang, 2014; Aslam & Khattak, 2011; Manan & David, 2014). English proficiency is still seen as indispensable for both administrative roles and higher education. Studies suggest more diverse models that would not neglect local languages and would treat linguistic competence as an academic resource rather than a privilege (Durrani et al., 2017).

The differentiation between the two school streams is also important: in government schools, MOI is Urdu, while in private schools Urdu is treated as a second language after English (Coleman, 2010). This distribution along language lines, combined with the unequal allocation of resources between public and private schools, has created a system in which English-medium schooling is equated with top-quality education and elite status, while Urdu-medium schooling is associated with lower-grade provision for lower-income groups (Shamim, 2011). The NEP 2009 acknowledges the importance of indigenous languages in initial education, though its application varies by province. Recent frameworks such as the Federal Foundational Learning Policy (2024) focus on reading and numeracy but give limited attention to communication at higher education levels. This constant surveillance ignores the discursive identity of millions from regional backgrounds and thus reinforces Urdu/English as the power languages. Additionally, two-tiered language policies (Durrani, 2012; Mahboob & Jain, 2016; Mustafa, 2015) and academic institutions based on cultural imperialism have an impact on student self-concept in multifaceted ways (Fanon, 1967; Rahman, 2004; Said, 1994; Shamim & Rashid, 2019). English has two roles in Pakistan, as a double barrier and as a badge of honour (Hamid & Niang, 2014). Language structures that benefit one group over the other reinforce educational inequalities for students from non-Urdu and non-English speaking backgrounds who often struggle to access challenging academic programmes and/or join in conversations with confidence. As Hamid et al.

(2013) note, MOI is a “vehicle for teaching and learning” (p. 144), and the language teachers use profoundly shapes student proficiency and understanding (Islam et al., 2015).

Literature Review

Linguistic Hierarchies in Pakistan: A Postcolonial Legacy

According to the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, Urdu was designated as the national language and English as the official language until provisions were made for Urdu to take its place, a transition predicted to occur within five years. In reality, however, English remained the language used in personal and professional establishments, by Pakistan’s military, government services and higher education institutions (Mahboob, 2002; Shamim, 2011). Mahboob and Jain (2016) recognized that the choice of medium of instruction remained entangled in the absence of a clear language policy for education. Rahman (1997) described the MOI debate in Pakistan as “a part of power struggle between different pressure groups, or elitist and proto-elitist” (p. 152), with Urdu or regional languages serving common people and English serving the elite, a division that, during colonial rule, functioned as a “gate keeping function” (Tollefson, 2015, p. 134) to balance the social hierarchy. These inherited patterns continued in Pakistan and made the English language privileged and prestigious in all spheres of academics. Recent scholars, such as Canagarajah (2022) and Liu and Xu (2025), warned about the reconfiguration of the linguistic hierarchy in the world due to the global recognition of English, without necessarily being beneficial for regional language speakers.

Student Experiences in Multilingual Higher Education

Exploration of students' lived experiences from multilingual and minority linguistic backgrounds in higher education environments is scarce, specifically in Pakistan, where Urdu and English dominate and tend to push back the regional languages. It being a post-colonial context, language is not just for communication; it is related to identity, class, performance, and socioeconomic progress (Altbach, 1971; Wolfe, 2006; Mirza, et al., 2024). Urdu as the national language was at the heart of higher education. Urdu was believed to promote understanding and appreciation of the rich heritage, literature and arts of Pakistan and instill pride and unity among the students of the country across the country (Darvin & Norton, 2021). Learning in the local language might have improved intellectual involvement and academic performance (Darvin & Norton, 2021). Additionally, Ali and Habib (2025) demonstrated that language related anxiety was very much related to gender, culture, and social norms, also influencing students' ability to perform in a language other than their native language, in public speaking or in classroom interaction.

Linguistic Hierarchies and Educational Inequity

Many factors influenced the decision for MOI, such as the language needs of the learner, parental attitudes, and teacher perspectives. One of the main reasons for the decline of Urdu as an academic language was the absence of sustained research in language planning in Pakistan (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2011). English is also treated as a marker of socioeconomic development in the era of globalization. Hussain and Amanat (2021) pointed out that Urdu was important in the academic arena to make it accessible, and research indicated that the use of Urdu in higher education could help close the gap between elite and common students (Otheguy et al., 2015). However, subjects such as International Relations, Medical Sciences, Engineering and Information Technology were taught in English, while the humanities and arts, seen as low-prestige subjects, were taught in Urdu (Mustafa, 2015; Rahman, 2004). Ali and Ali (2026a) showed that linguistic access was itself a form of privilege; learners from underprivileged backgrounds who lacked English proficiency were excluded from the digital and academic resources that more advantaged peers took for granted.

Multilingual Identity Negotiation and Emotional Challenges

In Pakistan, learners at government institutions feel comfortable speaking Urdu, while those at private institutions tend to focus on English and associate Urdu with a lower social background. Teachers at government institutions were sometimes seen as less privileged than those at private institutions because of lower English proficiency (Dagenais et al., 2009). Language inequality created difficulties for both instructors and students in government settings, even as Urdu remained the preferred medium for expressing thought and emotion. This thus created a tension in the academic structure in Pakistan in view of the conflicting views of the public and private sector regarding the importance of Urdu and English, and balancing local relevance with international engagement created challenges for the attainment of equity in Urdu-medium education (Canagarajah, 2010). From a pedagogical action research approach, Ali and Nauman (2026) also claimed that communicative anxiety in an academic context demanded conscious and sustained pedagogical intervention and thus the need for language development support in academic contexts for non-English-medium learners.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Although a substantial body of work has examined language policy and medium of instruction in Pakistan (Kalsoom, et al., 2020; Rahman, 2004; Shamim, 2008; Mahboob, 2002), there are several gaps unaddressed. Most of the work is concentrated at the school level, with far less attention paid to higher education. What research did exist at the university level tended to centre the perspectives of policymakers and teachers rather than students themselves, and rarely examined students from marginalised linguistic communities as a distinct group. Most notably, the emotional and identity dimensions of language experience remained largely unstudied, with existing scholarship favouring measurable outcomes such as proficiency or academic performance over students' lived sense of confidence, belonging, or self-worth. This study responded to that gap through a phenomenological approach centred on students' own accounts of navigating English- and Urdu-dominated university environments.

Research Questions

1. How do multilingual university students perceive and experience the relative status and value of English, Urdu, and regional languages within their academic and social environments?
2. What academic, linguistic, emotional, and social challenges do students face in navigating linguistic hierarchies?
3. How do students from different language backgrounds negotiate and construct their multilingual identities in spaces where English and Urdu are dominant?
4. In what ways does linguistic marginalization reinforce patterns of exclusion in classroom interactions and institutional practices in higher education?

Research Methodology

The study is based on an interpretivist paradigm and uses a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the experience of English- and Urdu-dominated learning environments for multilingual university students in Pakistan. The idea of linguistic capital too is at the core of this study; it considers language skills as a symbolic power that gives access to the academic success and social mobility and institutional recognition of the individual in a different manner. In this instance, the study focuses on the linguistic stratification in higher education and the differential distribution of linguistic capital influencing students' academic and social lives.

Participants and Sampling

The participants of this research were 9 university students speaking eight different languages; Sindhi (two dialects: laari dialect of the lower section of Sindh and utraadi dialect of upper section of Sindh), Pashto, Punjabi, Balochi, Shina (spoken mainly in the northern part of Pakistan, including Chitral and Gilgit), Rangri (spoken by the Punjabis of Rajput community) and Turkish and Gujrati. The participants were selected using purposive sampling among those who were multilingual and English and/or Urdu was their medium of instruction in Pakistani universities. This sampling was used because it provided rich and relevant insights from people who were at the intersection of linguistic hierarchy and academic experience where differences in linguistic capital are most salient.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews. Each interview's duration was between 35 and 60 minutes (Zoom), and recordings were made with the consent of the individuals. The researchers' institutional review committee granted ethical approval for the study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interview, explaining the voluntary nature of participation and the right to decline to take part in the interview, as well as confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their responses. This method allowed participants to freely discuss what actually happened in the classroom, as well as communicate information about communication in the classroom, expectations of the academic content, negotiating one's identity, and issues with linguistic imbalance. Students were asked about their sense of inclusion/exclusion due to language, exposure to English and Urdu in educational institutions, language barriers in understanding and participation, strategies for overcoming language barriers, and their opinion regarding the importance of regional languages at universities.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Several steps were taken to ensure the credibility of the findings. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with a small group of the participants for member checking, to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented. The coding process was discussed with a second reader to ensure that codes, categories, and themes were consistent, and a coding audit trail was kept throughout. This proximity to the topic was also used as an asset to grasp participants' accounts with empathetic understanding, but was also explicitly bracketed in the coding process to ensure that the meaning of participants, not the researchers' assumptions, was at the heart of the analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006,2020,2021) six-phase thematic analysis, applied within the study's broader interpretivist phenomenological framework: familiarization with the transcripts, generation of initial codes, searching for candidate themes, reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the full data set, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Codes and emerging themes were compared across participants' accounts to identify shared and divergent patterns in how English, Urdu and regional languages were experienced, while individual participants' own words were retained in the reporting of themes so that the particularity of their lived experience, central to the study's phenomenological orientation, was not lost in the cross-case comparison.

Theme 1: Linguistic identity and sense of self

This theme explored the learners' perception of their multilingual/bilingual identity, the relationship of this identity to their academic life, and the relationship between their ethnic and linguistic associations and their self-image and self-confidence. Multilingualism was viewed as something good to some students and as something they felt uncomfortable or displaced in an English-dominant academic setting to others.

Subtheme 1.1: Linguistic pride and empowerment

Students feel good about having more than one language to call their own and consider it a tool for learning and personal growth. They are often associated with cognitive and social benefits that stem from their multilingualism.

“I’m multilingual; I can speak three languages, and I think it’s a very valuable and useful thing especially in academic life and also in my future career.” (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

“I identify myself as multilingual because I speak more than two languages on a daily basis... It gives me a lot of advantage as I can switch whenever I want to.” (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

These statements illustrated positive identity formation through multilingualism. For learners, linguistic competence was bound not only to scholastic achievement but also to self-esteem and career goals. A multilingual identity was both an indicator of skill and a source of self-assurance.

Subtheme 1.2: Cultural Displacement and Minority Identity

While multilingualism brought pride, many learners from non-Urdu backgrounds- Turkish, Sindhi, Balochi- sensed a lack of inclusion because of being a language minority. Their sense of being “different” became noticeable in both academic spaces and social gatherings.

“My mother tongue is different than all other students, so I’m actually in the minority in the class, and it also shapes my sense of belonging. I don’t really feel like I belong to this country or to this culture.” (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

“My mother tongue, sometimes, does affect my sense of belonging because not many people speak it.” (Participant 9, female, Sindhi background, laari dialect)

These accounts revealed that linguistic variety was not always honoured: minority language speakers experienced isolation within predominantly Urdu- and English-speaking university environments.

Subtheme 1.3: Identity Fluidity and Linguistic Adaptation

Some learners reported that their linguistic identity was dynamic and context-dependent; it changed depending on context, audience and purpose. This was a mixed sense of identity which was established due to the multilingual context of Pakistan.

“Each language makes me feel differently about myself; at home, I speak Balochi, and at University, I speak English.” (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

“Talking Urdu, Punjabi, and English helps me to build bridges and understand the people from different backgrounds.” (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

This versatility illustrated language as a useful tool and as a dynamic sign of self. Language switching was not just a necessity but a means for learners to navigate through various academic and cultural contexts.

Subtheme 1.4: Tension Between Academic and Cultural Identities

Many participants voiced a conflict between academic identity (English) and traditional or regional identity (mother tongues). English was essential for academic success, but it was also a language imposed upon them which separated them from their own culture.

Participant 1 (female, Turkish background) said, “I think English is the language of the world, everything is available in English, when the teacher switches to Urdu, I can't follow, when the teacher switches to English again, others can't, there's always a gap.”

I feel like I live in two worlds, as all the courses are in English, but my culture and daily life are not,” (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

These accounts reveal that learners had to negotiate their way through a set of unequal social values among the different linguistic spheres. Learners' voices exposed an intricate emotional topography of linguistic identity and pride, as well as feelings of empowerment, isolation, and adaptive co-existence. Multilingualism opened up perspectives, but it also revealed “who feels at home” in the academic context. For these students, language was not just a bridge but also a boundary which limited their learning experiences.

Theme 2: Language and Confidence in Academic Settings

A major concern for the multilingual learners was that of confidence. Learners from English medium schools were more fluent and comfortable, while learners from regional-medium and Urdu-medium schools reported feeling hesitant, shy, and uncertain. Confidence was not permanent; it was a product of exposure, peer interaction and instructor attitudes.

Subtheme 2.1: Confidence Linked to English Proficiency and Schooling Background

Pupils regularly associated their own self-assurance in their academic work with their previous language of instruction. People with an English education background felt they were more comfortable expressing their thoughts in classrooms, and others said they were initially unconfident.

Participant 8 (male, Gujarati background) explained, *“I feel confident. At first year when I was in university, I was less confident, but now I am in my third year, I got used to it.”*

“As I have learned in English-medium school, I have no problems in understanding lectures and writing assignments.” (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

“My English-medium schooling positively influenced me. I feel confident while speaking English with teachers and fellows.” (Participant 5, female, Shina background)

“When you are totally from some other language background and not used to speaking English, you may find it troublesome to speak in university.” (Participant 6, female, Rangri background)

These accounts showed how academic advantages acquired in primary schooling translated into confidence capital at the university level.

Subtheme 2.2: Hesitation, Anxiety, and Fear of Judgment

Students who used a language other than English often felt nervous about having their accent, sentence structure, or vocabulary judged to be incorrect. Their linguistic vulnerability could sometimes render their voice for classroom participation mute.

“I do feel comfortable while speaking English, but sometimes I mispronounce the word, which makes me under-confident.” (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

“Sometimes I was afraid as the teacher was more professional and fluent, so I don't feel confident to answer a question in the English language.” (Participant 9, female, Sindhi background, laari dialect)

"In my first semester, I was hesitant to respond in English, but with practice I got the courage to do so." (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

Language anxiety contributed to the problems of participation and internalized the dichotomy of "good" English and "broken" English, a legacy of postcolonial communication apprehension. Ali and Ali (2026b) pointed to a similar trend in their biopsychosocial approach to public speaking anxiety: when anxiety is triggered by public speaking in a second language environment, psychological and physiological inhibitors are triggered.

Subtheme 2.3: Accent, Pronunciation, and Perceived Intelligence

Many pupils said that the way they spoke affected people's attitude to their intelligence and ability. They equated a smooth pronunciation with social prestige and scholarly credibility.

"How to speak more clearly and smoothly gives a positive view to the listeners." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

"Yes, it does, but it depends on the number of books you read and the number of movies you watch. I'm a good reader, but some words I have to misspell because I haven't seen the movie or read the book." (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

"For some people, my accent gives the impression that I am more confident or smarter." (Participant 5, female, Shina background)

These answers showed a high aesthetic bias in spoken English, as pronunciation was treated as a proxy for intelligence and social capital, and students were encouraged to engage in implicit self-monitoring.

Subtheme 2.4: Gradual Growth and Self-Efficacy

Over time, many participants reported building their confidence as they got used to the university setting and developed it through presentations and group work.

"Initially, I feared that I would find it difficult to communicate in English at the university but now because of group work and presentation, I feel confident to communicate in English during class discussion." (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

"Earlier, I used to be under-confident when speaking English in front of others, but now I am able to present with ease as everybody struggles at the beginning." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

This was because the learner's anxiety was replaced by greater academic agency, a trait that was often accompanied by teachers' openness to code-switching and/or collaborative peer assistance.

Subtheme 2.5: English as a Symbol of Academic Competence

During the interviews, English was viewed as a criterion for academic achievement. Students noticed that English-speaking peers were treated more respectfully and that teachers tended to think of people being fluent in English as being smart. Such a belief reinforced language stratification and rendered English into an empowering and inequitable tool.

"Yes, English-medium and A-level students tend to dominate more... teachers admire those who use jargon." (Participant 6, female, Rangri background)

“In Pakistan, a person who speaks English is considered an educated person and gets more respect.” (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

Learners’ academic confidence was intricately connected with their linguistic backgrounds, schooling histories and classroom environments. Those with strong English foundations demonstrated ease and assurance, while others experienced uncertainty and language anxiety. Accent and articulation functioned as social gatekeepers, shaping perceptions of intelligence.

Theme 3: Language Hierarchy and Inequality

English held the highest status in the educational hierarchy for most participants, symbolizing authority, influence and intellectual legitimacy. Urdu sat in the middle, while regional languages remained overlooked. This hierarchy affected student participation, teaching approaches, group dynamics and self-image.

Subtheme 3.1: English as a Marker of Superiority and Power

“Yes, speaking English is considered the biggest achievement, and even teachers admire those who are fluent.” (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

“People assume that English-medium students are more confident or smarter. It does work in my favor sometimes.” (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

“Speaking English fluently gives students more social respect in university circles.” (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

“In Pakistan, if a person speaks fluent English, they are considered educated and get more opportunities.” (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

These reflections showed how English functioned as a language asset, a status symbol that opened institutional doors while marginalizing those who lacked it. Learners were aware of this unequal symbolic power and described it as both empowering and discriminatory.

Subtheme 3.2: Urdu as the Lingua Franca and Middle Ground

While English dominated formal academic discourse, Urdu appeared as a bridge language through which most students navigated social and classroom engagement. However, some described Urdu as both unifying and exclusionary, depending on their own linguistic background.

“Most of the time, teachers switch from English to Urdu, and when they do, Urdu-speaking students understand easily, but I struggle.” (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

“We all are comfortable with Urdu. It’s our lingua franca.” (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

“We mostly communicate in Urdu, but when a person doesn’t know Urdu, it becomes hard to communicate with them.” (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

Urdu facilitated connection among most Pakistani students but marginalized non-Urdu speakers. It was both an embracing and an exclusionary force, reflecting internal linguistic hierarchies within Pakistan itself.

Subtheme 3.3: Marginalization of Regional and Minority Languages

Many students expressed frustration that their regional languages were ignored in academic settings, overlooked by both instructors and fellow students.

"Teachers sometimes ask why I don't speak Urdu, but I have never been encouraged to use my own language." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

"A teacher didn't seem to understand or value it much when I used a Balochi example in my presentation that felt discouraging." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

"In my university, there is no system for the regional languages; only English and Urdu are used more commonly." (Participant 8, male, Gujarati background)

This feedback exposed the linguistic invisibility of local languages in formal settings. Even where multilingualism was nominally acknowledged, it remained hierarchically structured, English at the top, Urdu as mediator, and regional languages as socially peripheral.

Subtheme 3.4: Teacher and Institutional Biases

"Teachers show bias towards those students who speak English, even if they say meaningless things." (Participant 6, female, Rangri background)

"Teachers teach by using a language which is understood by the majority of students, leaving minority groups out." (Participant 8, male, Gujarati background)

"Once I used Balochi in class, and the teacher didn't value it much; it made me feel my language was less important." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

Such classroom practices not only shaped participation but sustained inequality by equating language accuracy with academic worth. Learners became acutely aware of how institutional conventions systematically advantaged certain linguistic identities.

Subtheme 3.5: Colonial Legacy and Internalized Linguistic Bias

"Yes, English medium students are dominant; we are all victims of colonialism; we have made English a tool to measure intelligence." (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

"It establishes inequality in opportunities as we value English as a symbol of prestige." (Participant 9, female, Sindhi background, laari dialect)

The interviews showed a strong linguistic hierarchy in higher education in Pakistan, which was deeply rooted in the colonial system and continued to be supported by institutional custom. English represented academic legitimacy and social status, Urdu was used as a language bridge and mediator, and regional languages were made invisible. Language was not a neutral medium but rather a marker of social difference, which affected access, recognition, and power in educational settings.

Theme 4: Strategies and Adaptation in Multilingual Contexts.

Students were always able to communicate despite the communication barriers. They learned to be flexible in their language use to survive and thrive in school, with an active negotiation between local and global ways of knowing.

Subtheme 4.1: Translanguaging and Code-Switching as Learning Tools

Many participants made use of code-switching, shifting from one language to another, and translanguaging, the seamless mixing of multiple languages, to help them understand more complex academic content.

"I sometimes translated into my first language in the first and second year to make sure I was studying the right thing and understanding it correctly." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

"Yes, I do translate difficult concepts in the Urdu language." (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

"If I don't understand the English written sentence, I do translate it into the Urdu language to make it easy for myself." (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

These accounts showed that learners actively constructed meaning across languages. Rather than undermining English learning, translanguaging deepened comprehension and promoted academic engagement.

Subtheme 4.2: Peer Collaboration and Informal Support Networks

"To some extent we all know English, so when everyone knows their responsibilities everything will go smoothly." (Participant 6, female, Rangri background)

"In group projects, language differences affect the understanding of a concept; so, we use Urdu language to explain it in a simpler way." (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

"When students form groups, they often help weaker members understand English material better." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

Collaborative learning emerged as a process of shared coping, a democratic alternative to the hierarchical learning process and a sense of belonging that transcended language.

Subtheme 4.3: Use of Technology and AI Tools for Linguistic Support

Many of the learners reported using AI tools, translation apps, and online videos to aid in their learning. The most commonly referenced tools were ChatGPT, Grammarly, Google Translate and YouTube tutorials.

"I use ChatGPT for study." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

"To understand the meaning of words, synonyms, and examples, I use the AI." (Participant 9, female, Sindhi background, laari dialect)

"I use Grammarly and ChatGPT to correct my grammar, and to make things clear." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

Technology was an important language mediator that gave learners autonomy to fill in understanding. The findings here aligned with those of Ali, Siraj, and Ali (2024), who reported that the use of AI-based vocabulary tools in ESL settings enhanced autonomous learning.

Subtheme 4.4: Reliance on Dictionaries, Online Resources, and Media Exposure

"I use dictionaries to understand the meaning and code-switching for better understanding." (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

"I watch YouTube videos to clear my concepts regarding the sentence structure and grammar use." (Participant 9, female, Sindhi background, laari dialect)

"Reading English novels and watching English movies helps me with the pronunciation of fancy words." (Participant 8, male, Gujrati background)

These self-directed practices demonstrated learners' autonomous engagement with language development and the productive merging of formal and informal learning channels.

Subtheme 4.5: Adapting Through Exposure and Experience

"At first, I was hesitant to speak English in classroom discussions, but with the exposure and experience, I became confident." (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

"When I joined, I was confused, but later on, online research and class discussions helped me to understand better." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

This theme illustrated that multilingual students were resourceful and flexible language learners, rather than recipients of language instruction. Their daily practices, translanguaging, collaboration with peers, and the use of AI and self-study demonstrated a mode of linguistic agency that challenged system imbalance. These practices were the products of students' creativity, resilience, and innovation in the postcolonial academic landscape.

Theme 5: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Linguistic Belonging

This theme explored the ways in which learners' linguistic identities influenced their participation within academic communities, their friendships, and their participation and emotional security in the classroom. Belonging was defined as linguistic and relational, depending on whether peers, teachers, and institutions acknowledged linguistic backgrounds. The results indicated that linguistic inclusion was still precariously implemented in the institutions where English and Urdu were predominant languages.

Subtheme 5.1: Language as a Bridge to Belonging

"I feel more relaxed with other Sindhi speakers as we understand each other better." (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

"Urdu is the language that most people use in our class, and it helps me to connect with the students of other provinces." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

"As not many students speak Rangri here, Urdu is a language that connects me with most people here." (Participant 6, female, Rangri background)

Sharing linguistic codes generated safe spaces of belonging in which learners could express themselves freely without fear of judgment. Language served as social glue in an otherwise stratified environment.

Subtheme 5.2: Linguistic Isolation and Exclusion

Many participants explained that when their regional languages were not widely spoken, they felt loneliness or exclusion in class. These learners frequently felt both socially marginalized and academically neglected.

"Because my mother tongue is different from other students, and I'm in a minority, so I don't feel like I belong to this culture, it also shapes my sense of belonging as well." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

"Sometimes people form a group of those people who speak the same languages. If you don't speak, you will feel left out." (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

"I'm from a Shina-speaking background. People don't even know about this language so I often stay quiet." (Participant 5, female, Shina background)

In classrooms where students came from different language backgrounds, minority language speakers constantly faced a negotiation between visibility and silence.

Subtheme 5.3: Peer Grouping and Linguistic Cliques

"Most of the people form groups based on their regional language like Sindhi or Punjabi; it just happens naturally." (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

"People who are from the same language backgrounds prefer to work together; others are sometimes excluded." (Participant 9, female, Sindhi background, laari dialect)

"Other students don't understand the Turkish language, so I just avoid speaking in Turkish." (Participant 1, female, Turkish background)

These dynamics showed that linguistic similarities offered comfort but sustained the subtle exclusion of others, particularly minority language speakers.

Subtheme 5.4: Desire for Linguistic Inclusivity and Respect

"We need a system that gives respect to all languages, not just Urdu and English." (Participant 4, male, Balochi background)

"Teachers have to create an environment in a classroom where every student expresses themselves in a language in which they feel comfortable." (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

"Multilingual classrooms will help all learners to express themselves, and they'll also feel included and respected." (Participant 7, male, Pashto background)

Learners here expressed the need for a language policy that asserted identity, promoted participation and treated linguistic diversity as a pedagogical strength.

Subtheme 5.5: Emotional Consequences of Linguistic Exclusion

Linguistic exclusion had a negative impact not only on educational engagement, but also on the learners' well-being and confidence. Lack of fluency led to anxiety and self-restraint.

"If I do not express my thoughts in English, I feel I am not smart like others." (Participant 2, female, Punjabi background)

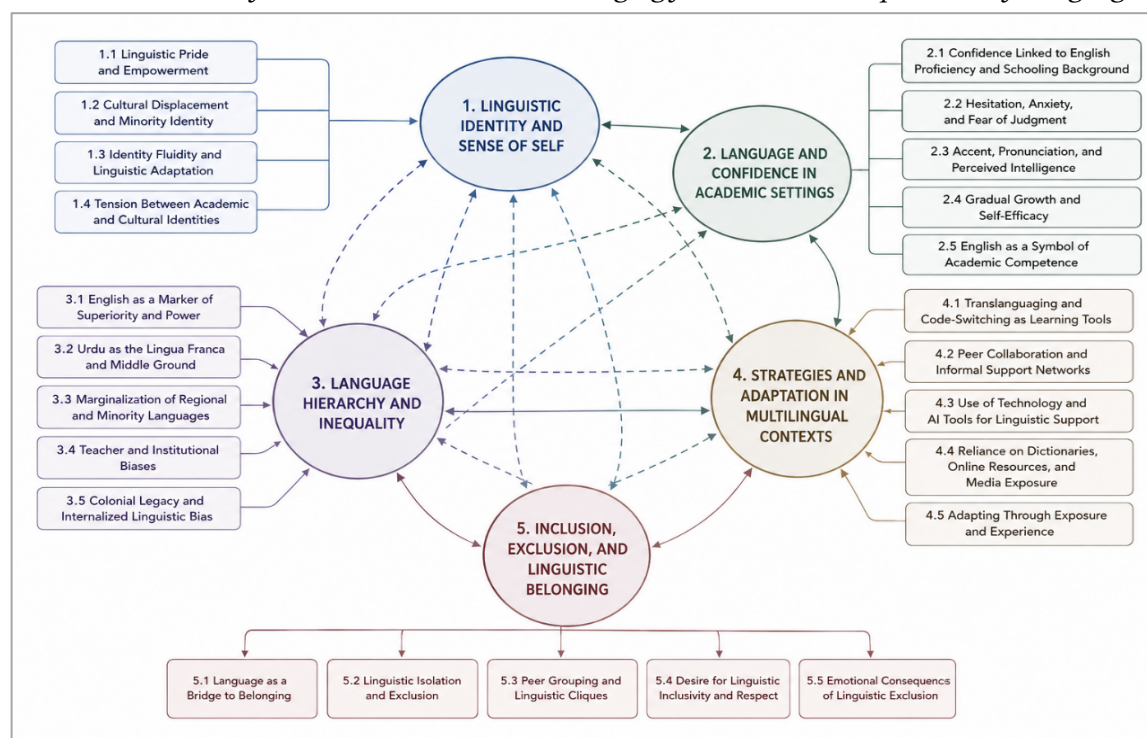
"If people mock you for your fluency and correct you for mispronunciation, it's a question of your worth." (Participant 3, female, Sindhi background, utraadi dialect)

"Sometimes, I hesitate to speak because I know that I might be mispronouncing it." (Participant 5, female, Shina background)

Multilingual learners' belonging was tied to linguistic acceptance by their peers, instructors, and institutions. Linguistic variety fostered connectedness, co-operation and confidence. It led to silence, separation and self-doubt when neglected. The insight required pedagogical practices that were more inclusive than just tolerating language diversity.

Figure 1

Thematic Network of Themes and Subthemes Emerging from Students' Experiences of Language in Higher Education



Discussion

Taken together, the findings of this study responded directly to the four research questions guiding this research. In relation to RQ1, Theme 3 (Language Hierarchy and Inequality) showed that students perceived and experienced English as a marker of status and power, Urdu as a functional middle ground, and regional languages as marginalized, reflecting the unequal distribution of linguistic capital across academic and social life. RQ2 was addressed primarily through Language and Confidence in Academic Settings and Inclusion, Exclusion, and Linguistic Belonging, which surfaced the academic, emotional, and social challenges students faced, from anxiety and fear of judgment to isolation and diminished self-worth. RQ3 was answered through Linguistic Identity and Sense of Self and Strategies and Adaptation in Multilingual Contexts, which illustrated how students negotiated and constructed multilingual identities through pride, cultural displacement, identity fluidity, and translanguaging. RQ4 was addressed through Language Hierarchy and Inequality and Inclusion, Exclusion, and Linguistic Belonging, which showed how institutional and teacher biases, together with peer grouping, reinforced patterns of exclusion in classroom interactions and reproduced colonial linguistic hierarchies within higher education.

The question of language choice as MOI between English and Urdu was a difficult one for a multilingual country like Pakistan (Kalsoom, et al., 2020). Tracing this plurilingual tradition back to pre-partition India, Mahboob and Jain (2016) argued that the choice between regional languages and English as a medium of instruction was not new. English could not be dismissed as a language of knowledge, research and professional power, while Urdu remained the language in which both instructors and learners felt most at ease. Nyika (2015) emphasized that the regional language as a medium of instruction had an edge over second and foreign language instruction in terms of learner performance and achievement. Consistent with this, our study showed that MOI created genuine tension between academic and cultural identities: because students' academic expectations were organized around English while their regional identities were rooted in their mother tongues, they had to constantly navigate between linguistic domains that carried different social values.

The majority of the university students in this study were English as a second language (ESL) learners due to their rural or regional backgrounds, which provided them with less than adequate exposure to English prior to university. Their experiences illustrated the wider socioeconomic divide between the elite and the majority, as school choice reflected success in English proficiency, and thus the type of job that was available upon completion of education (Jafri et al., 2013). The dichotomy of English-medium education and Urdu-medium education, therefore, reinforced classism in society (Khattak, 2014; Mustafa, 2015; Rahman, 2004).

The results on multilingual adaptation demonstrated the impact of students' linguistic identity on their social inclusion and emotional wellbeing within educational contexts. In the institutions where Urdu and English were prevalent, the linguistic diversity was still under threat. Mahboob (2017) also noted that research instruments that use the English language exclude the voice of the participants who do not have English as their native language. The participants' preference for Urdu in expressing their thoughts was a reflection of the comfort and greater ease of self-expression it provided. It is for the same reason that an unbiased examination of current language and education policies before implementing them is necessary and is advocated by many researchers (Altbach, 1971; Wolfe, 2006; Mirza, et al., 2024). The results were in line with Channa (2012), who found that the students agreed that English MOI could be used for science subjects and technical words. We added to this by demonstrating that confidence was not fixed but rather grew as a result of exposure, peer interaction, and instructor attitudes, and was influenced by the type of school attended. The exclusion of learners from education who attended a regional or Urdu-medium school was found in the study, as code-switching from Urdu to English had a negative impact on the academic performance of Urdu-medium learners at the university level (Garcia, & Wei, 2014; Irfan, 2022). The inability to communicate in English resulted in problems in communication, which made regional language learners reluctant to ask questions or communicate with their fellow classmates and instructors.

In many ways, the ability to speak English shaped the learners' experience in the university (Andrade, 2009). The findings suggested that Pakistan's current bilingual educational system could lead to stratification among the bilingual students and was a portal to segregation and inequality. This issue needed to be tackled as it had a negative impact on the quality of higher education in Pakistan. Students' involvement in academic life was closely related to their language background, school experiences, and classroom environment. Students who had a good foundation in English were confident and comfortable; others were able to deal with ambiguity and language apprehension. Pronunciation and accent were social gatekeepers and had an impact on perceptions of intelligence and proficiency. It was not only about language ability, it was also about the cultural status: the image of English hegemony in the educational system of Pakistan. The same was noted by Manan and David (2014), Shamim and Rashid (2019), and Anbreen (2015), who concluded that the command of English enhanced self-confidence, but not necessarily an identity change. The majority of participants explained that changing the language was a means to communicate about academic material, and a few participants explained that it served as a means to communicate unity and develop relationships with peers. Additionally, these accounts implied that code-switching was more a way of communicating and building relationships rather than a language constraint, consistent with the translanguaging perspectives of Mazak and Carroll (2016) and Canagarajah (2022). Translanguaging did not compromise English learning, but enhanced understanding and scholarly engagement.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. The study was conducted with a small number of students, i.e nine, and from a limited number of institutes, due to which the results obtained may not be generalized to the larger sample of multilingual university students in Pakistan. Interviews were conducted online through Zoom technology, and this could have affected the content of what participants shared, as well as those who do not have a reliable internet

connection. The participants were self-selected volunteers, which can vary in self-confidence and openness compared to the students who opted out of participation. The coding was conducted by one researcher, with a second researcher consulted for consistency, and the findings are presented here as one interpretively informed rendering of the data, not as a definitive interpretation. Interviews combined with classroom observation and a more diverse, institutional sample of students and teachers could prove useful for future studies.

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the problems encountered by university students of diverse language backgrounds. The results revealed a huge impact of English dominance on students' academic engagement and confidence. Students from English-medium backgrounds maneuvered with confidence during classroom activities, while students from regional and Urdu-medium backgrounds often feel low in confidence to speak. The use of code-switching by regional language students emerged as a coping strategy. The findings expressed the need to remove the structural inequalities that are being produced by the English-Urdu divide in the context where English has become a measure of intelligence and social value. It is important to acknowledge the multilingual repertoires as resources for learning and not as weaknesses, if Pakistani higher education is to be made more equitable and linguistically inclusive. As Ali and Ali (2026a) demonstrate in the case of underprivileged youth, linguistic access is a kind of opportunity: if it is not intentionally provided, structural inequalities will be repeated generation by generation.

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