

Existing Gaps in English-Speaking Proficiency Among Secondary School Students in Punjab, Pakistan: A Diagnostic Analysis

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ABSTRACT: English communication skills are very important for success in academic and career life. But students in secondary schools across Pakistan are invariably failing to meet international criteria of competence. The study is a diagnostic study to find out the English-speaking proficiency gaps of 9th-grade female students (N=50) of a public school of Lahore, Punjab. The study design was quantitative diagnostic baseline survey design based on a positivist research paradigm. The Performance Assessment for Language Students rubric was utilized because it provides standardized criteria for assessing many aspects of speaking proficiency, such as fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, comprehensibility, task completion and language control. The standardized descriptors for performance increased consistency of scoring and enabled reliable diagnostic assessment of both interactive (conversation) and independent (monologue) speaking activities. The second linguistic expert set scoring to assure objectivity and inter-rater dependability. Descriptive analysis showed that 94% of the students performed below the "Meets Expectations" benchmark, with a full 70% falling into the "Does Not Meet Expectations" category. The whole mean score (M = 7.70 / 24) demonstrated serious deficits in speaking. All sub-indicators had considerable disparities with the largest gaps in Language Control (62%) and Vocabulary (59.3%) followed by Comprehensibility, Pronunciation, Fluency and Task Completion. The findings provide a diagnostic basis for future pedagogical interventions to shift English language training from rote learning to functional oral communication.

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Introduction

Proficiency in English, or effective communication in English, is a vital ability for secondary school students who wish to be successful in academic, social and professional contexts (Ahmad et al., 2023). Language is the main tool of social interaction and sharing of ideas; hence, it is always growing to fulfill the changing communication demands. The necessity of communication drives people to be more creative in producing new media as a tool to facilitate the

communication process (Nasution & Tambunan, 2022). In Pakistan, English is primarily learned as a second or foreign language. Although it holds official status in government and higher education, a considerable proportion of learners are unable to communicate effectively in English (Ali et al., 2020). While communication is generally more fluent in one's native language, learners often experience difficulty when required to use a second language in real-time interaction.

Speaking fluency is particularly complicated as it involves the combination of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Therefore, many learners resort to code-switching, including Urdu and Punjabi aspects in English communication (Khan, 2024). Sometimes, learners are psychologically constrained by limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes, which decreases their engagement in spoken interaction (Amiruddin, 2022). Thus, the limited vocabulary and the worry about performance create a large gap between what kids can really say orally and what the curriculum expects from them.

Pedagogical Challenges in the Pakistani Context

The widespread nature of disparities in English speaking skill can be largely attributable to conventional educational practices in Pakistan. The existing education style has naturally been based on rote learning and written examinations but with limited focus on spoken skills. However, the National Education Policy (2017 – 2025) recognizes that such approaches are not suitable for many classroom contexts and could further increase the competence gap among students.

This is further reinforced by an exam-centered system that emphasizes reading and writing abilities more than speaking skills (Khan, 2024). Rote learning has been found to reduce opportunities for critical thinking and spontaneous language use (Tayyab et al., 2023). In many public-school classes, learning is about memory. This encourages a “culture of memorization” in which students largely depend on the knowledge that is repeated (Haq et al., 2020). As a result, learners frequently acquire purely declarative knowledge of grammar rules but remain unable to proceduralize this knowledge during spontaneous, real-time speech.

Focus and Rationale of the Study

The present study addresses the issue of gaps in English-speaking proficiency among secondary school students in Punjab, Pakistan. The limited emphasis on speaking activities has contributed to a mismatch between students' current performance and the expected level of communicative competence. Even students who perform well in written examinations frequently demonstrate difficulty in speaking English fluently (Bilal et al., 2013).

To address this issue, it is necessary to establish an empirical understanding of these gaps. The establishment of this diagnostic baseline is a basic necessity for the adoption of the Content and Language Integrated Modular Approach (CLIMA). It guarantees that the recommended modular intervention is specific to the learners' particular linguistic weaknesses; so, it is a data-driven approach to communicative competence. Therefore, this study adopts a diagnostic approach to analyze the difference between students' current speaking proficiency and the expected standard, as defined by the PALS rubric.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the existing gaps in English-speaking skills of the secondary school students in Punjab, Pakistan.

The study also quantified baseline performance, thus providing empirical evidence of the existing gap between the current and expected level of proficiency, supporting the need for improved instructional practices and future pedagogical interventions to bridge the identified proficiency gaps.

Literature Review

The Evolution of English Language Teaching (ELT)

English Language Teaching (ELT) has made great strides worldwide throughout the years. The first methods of education, especially the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), were based on the memorization of vocabulary and grammatical structures (Pennington & Richards, 2016). These approaches enabled the learners to gain linguistic information, but they provided few opportunities for the learners to utilize the language in real communicative circumstances; therefore, a gap existed between theoretical and functional use of language.

These restrictions brought a slow change in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which stresses meaningful participation, fluency, and the use of language for reliable discourse in the real world (Salmanova, 2025). Across this communicative paradigm, recent approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) have become more popular across the world. CLIL stands for learning topic knowledge and language learning (Lee, 2024) and actively using language to express thoughts while working with subject matter. This transformation at a worldwide level demonstrates the requirement of teaching methods able to bridge the gap between the theoretical knowledge of language and the active performance in the real world.

Pedagogical Practices in the Pakistani Context

While global trends in language teaching methodologies have been evolving, classroom practices in Pakistan are still mostly traditional. This research shows that GTM and other methods are still dominant, with inadequate use of communicative and interactive teaching strategies (Tariq et al., 2024).

This trend is also maintained by the examination, which focused on the structure of the education system where assessment methodologies are mostly based on reading and writing skills but not on speaking ability (Mingyan et al., 2025). Hence, pupils learn the theoretical understanding of grammar but find it difficult to employ the material in spoken communication. This systemic mismatch means that students in the public sector graduate with grave speech deficits and without meeting basic communication standards.

Studies in the setting of Pakistan have shown that many of the students of secondary schools are at basic levels of competence (A1-A2), which means they have limited speaking ability (Nageen, 2025). The findings show that current instructional techniques are not appropriately supportive of the development of communicative competence and, as a result, contribute to persisting gaps in speaking skill.

Psychological Barriers and the Need for Empirical Diagnosis

In addition to pedagogical considerations, psychological variables also have a substantial impact on the molding of learners' speaking performance. Studies have indicated that speaking anxiety is a typical problem for language learners, especially in situations with limited opportunities for spoken contact (Iqbal et al., 2025). Learners generally are reluctant to engage in oral communication because of low vocabulary, lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes.

In typical classroom contexts, with an emphasis on correctness and memory, learners can grow less eager to engage in spontaneous communication. This lessens the opportunities for practice and enlarges the gap between their present speaking skill and the level of proficiency that is required.

However, the available literature points to problems of speaking skills and student anxiety in Pakistan (Aashiq & Zahid, 2024); there is still a need for targeted empirical research that quantitatively investigates these inequalities across distinct speaking subskills. In particular, there are a few studies that have explored disparities in many domains such as fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and language control in interactive and independent speaking.

Such a diagnostic baseline is necessary to establish the gap between the learners' present performance and the projected levels of competency. This paves the way for the design of specific pedagogical strategies to bridge these gaps and enhance overall communicative ability.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Paradigm

This study was conducted under the positivist research paradigm to identify the gaps in English-speaking proficiency of secondary school students. The positivist approach focuses on measurable and factual data, which helps in maintaining objectivity and consistency in research findings (Park et al., 2020). Therefore, a quantitative diagnostic baseline survey design was used to examine the speaking proficiency levels of students in different communicative subskills.

This design was suitable for the study because the researcher only wanted to assess the current speaking proficiency level of students through standardized assessment criteria. No treatment or instructional intervention was given during the study. Different measurable indicators were used to develop a baseline picture of students' speaking performance in both interactive and independent speaking tasks before any future intervention.

Population and Sampling

The population of this study included all female students of 9th grade studying in Government Girls High Schools in Punjab, Pakistan. A two-step sampling technique was used to select the participants for the study.

In the first step, one Government Girls High School from Lahore was selected purposively. The school was chosen because its students had a background similar to the target population of public schools. This helped the researcher reduce the effect of differences in educational resources and learning environment.

In the second step, 50 female students of 9th grade were selected through convenience sampling based on their availability in the school. These students participated in the diagnostic baseline assessment, which was conducted to identify the existing gaps in English-speaking skills.

Research Instrumentation

Speaking skills in this study were assessed using the Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS) Level 2 rubric, which was initially developed by Fairfax County Public Schools. The scoring method was also made fairer by the use of this particular instrument for its simple grading criteria.

In order to obtain data, students carried out two tasks: a back-and-forth debate and an independent monologue. The subjects for discussion were taken directly from the curriculum, but were adapted slightly to fit the students' background and present understanding. Each student spoke for around three to five minutes. The sessions were tape-recorded so that the researcher could replay them and score the performances precisely at a later time.

The PALS rubric assesses student speaking proficiency across the following six distinct sub-indicators:

- **Task Completion:** The ability to accomplish the prompt and produce related content.
- **Comprehensibility:** The overall aptness of expression.
- **Fluency:** The flow of speech, including hesitation and pauses.
- **Pronunciation:** Accuracy of articulation, stress, and intonation.
- **Vocabulary:** Lexical choice and contextual clarity.
- **Language Control:** Grammatical accuracy and sentence structure during real-time speech.

All indicators were graded rigorously by whole numbers from 1 to 4 to improve interrater reliability and decrease the ambiguity of scoring. Consequently, the maximum possible raw score a student could achieve on a single task was 24. Numerical scores are associated with four levels of qualitative proficiency: Exceeds Expectations (EE), Meets Expectations (ME), Almost Meets Expectations (AME) and Does Not Meet Expectations (DNME).

The PALS rubric does include percentage conversions for the overall results, but not for the specific subskills. Hence, the percentage gaps for each speaking subskill were determined in this study by comparing the acquired mean scores with the expected proficiency benchmark (ME=3) using the formula: $\text{Gap \%} = ((3 - \text{Mean}) / 3) \times 100$.

For the purpose of this research, the “Meets Expectations (ME)” level was used as a standard proficiency benchmark and any performance below the level was treated as a gap.

To further support the objectivity of the assessment, inter-rater reliability was established by involving a second linguistic expert. An experienced English language instructor, this independent rater cross-scored a random sample of 20% of the audio recordings with the PALS rubric. A very high level of agreement was obtained (Intraclass Correlation Coefficient = .97) confirming the dependability of the diagnostic scores minimizing any rater bias.

Data Analysis Procedure

The acquired data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and mean scores) were utilized to assess the general competency levels and also to identify subskill performance. Furthermore, the percentage gap analysis was carried out to determine the extent of the gap between the students’ performance and the expected proficiency benchmark (ME) via the comparison of the students’ mean scores obtained with the benchmark proficiency level as indicated by the PALS rubric (ME = 3). The percentage of proficiency gap for each speaking subskill was computed as:

$$\text{Gap \%} = ((\text{Benchmark Mean} - \text{Obtained Mean}) / \text{Benchmark Mean}) \times 100$$

Using this method, the researcher was able to determine the extent to which the students' current speaking performance deviated from the predicted competency standard across all of the sub-indicators that were examined. Disparities were found when the scores that students received for their speaking performances were compared to the benchmark competency levels (also known as "Meets Expectations") that were defined by the standardized PALS rubric. A score that was lower than this criterion was considered to be an indication of a gap in skills competency and proficiency in the speaking subskills that were being evaluated.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, the school administration gave formal clearance. The participants were informed about the purpose and methods of the study and were told that their participation was completely optional. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymizing students’ identities during data collection and analysis. All audio recordings were limited to academic evaluation only and will not be made public outside this project.

Results and Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the diagnostic baseline assessment were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-26). The analysis used descriptive statistics to map the magnitude of the existing proficiency gaps across the entire cohort (N = 50). The statistical analysis used descriptive statistics mainly to analyze the size of the proficiency disparities among the participants. Table 1 was generated using frequency distribution and percentage analysis to categorize students across the four PALS proficiency levels. Table 2 utilized mean scores and standard deviation analysis to evaluate students’ performance across individual speaking sub-indicators. These

descriptive procedures were conducted through SPSS-26 to provide an objective diagnostic overview of the cohort's baseline speaking proficiency.

Descriptive Analysis of Overall Proficiency Gaps

The initial descriptive analysis evaluated the frequency distribution of the entire cohort across the four qualitative PALS proficiency levels. This data illustrates the magnitude of the gap between students' current performance and the expected proficiency level (ME).

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Baseline Speaking Proficiency Levels (N = 50)

Proficiency Level	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Does Not Meet Expectations (DNME)	35	70%
Almost Meets Expectations (AME)	12	24%
Meets Expectations (ME)	3	6%
Exceeds Expectations (EE)	0	0%
Total	50	100%

The data in Table 1 show a large discrepancy in total speaking proficiency. Out of the 50 students that were evaluated, 70% were classified as "Does Not Meet Expectations" (DNME) and 24% were at the "Almost Meets Expectations" (AME) level. Only 6% of students met the desired level of proficiency (ME), and none exceeded it. The AME level corresponds to around 70-79% on the PALS conversion scale, but the DNME level comprises any performance of 69% or lower and hence a significant proportion of pupils are functioning far below the predicted threshold.

In conclusion, a total of 94% of the students scored below the expected performance standard (ME). These results indicated a clear, defined baseline condition that depicted the extreme magnitude of the proficiency gap prior to any educational intervention.

Descriptive Analysis of Specific Speaking Sub-Indicators

To further explore the nature of these gaps, mean scores were generated for each of the six PALS sub-indicators for interactive (Dialogue) and independent (Monologue) tasks. The maximum possible score for each sub-indicator is 4.0, with a total task score of 24.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Baseline Speaking Sub-Indicators (N = 50)

PALS Sub-Indicators	Dialogue (M)	Dialogue (SD)	Monologue (M)	Monologue (SD)	Overall Interpretation
Language Control	1.17	0.33	1.14	0.47	Large Gap (DNME)
Comprehensibility	1.21	0.33	1.30	0.50	Large Gap (DNME)
Vocabulary	1.21	0.35	1.24	0.71	Large Gap (DNME)
Pronunciation	1.24	0.32	1.36	0.76	Large Gap (DNME)
Fluency	1.37	0.43	1.32	0.47	Large Gap (DNME)
Task Completion	1.44	0.48	1.35	0.53	Large Gap (DNME)
Overall Mean (/24)	7.70	2.06	7.70	2.14	Large Gap (DNME)

From Table 2, we can observe that the gaps are quite uniform across all subskills. The average for both Dialogue and Monologue tasks was 7.70 (SD = 2.06 and 2.14, respectively) out of 24 subskill scores. The relatively low standard deviations for all the sub-indicators suggest that the students' scores were closely tied around these low means, suggesting a fundamental issue affecting the entire cohort rather than individual outliers.

Regarding the individual sub-indicators, the most deficient one identified is Language Control, where the scores in dialogue (M = 1.17, SD = 0.33) and monologue (M = 1.14, SD = 0.47) were the lowest. This depicts an inherent struggle in creating grammatically correct phrases in actual communication. Similar large gaps were seen in Vocabulary (Dialogue: M = 1.21, SD = 0.35; Monologue: M = 1.24, SD = 0.71) and Comprehensibility (Dialogue: M = 1.21, SD = 0.33; Monologue: M = 1.30, SD = 0.50). This low proficiency was also consistently consistent in the other skills as well, namely Pronunciation (Dialogue: M = 1.24, SD = 0.32; Monologue: M = 1.36, SD = 0.76), Fluency (Dialogue: M = 1.37, SD = 0.43; Monologue: M = 1.32, SD = 0.47), and Task Completion (Dialogue: M = 1.44, SD = 0.48; Monologue: M = 1.35, SD = 0.53).

Such a lack is critical relative to the average proficiency level (ME = 3 for each ability). The percentage gaps show that in each component (Language Control, 62%; Vocabulary, 59.3%; Comprehensibility, 56.3%; Pronunciation, 56.3%; Fluency, 55%; and Task Completion, 53%), more than half of the required proficiency is not achieved. Generally, the empirical results show a significant systemic deficit in the development of functional oral communication abilities in the sample studied.

Discussion

The quantitative results of this analysis clearly show the missing pieces of the puzzle in the English language ability of secondary school students of Punjab, Pakistan, and to achieve the main research purpose. The study empirically shows that there is a large gap between the present proficiencies and the communicative standards necessary by comparing students' performance with the expected proficiency benchmark (ME).

Systemic Nature of Proficiency Gaps

One of the most major findings of this research is that a significant majority of 94% of the participants, performed below the expected proficiency level (ME) with 70% of the participants falling inside the "Does Not Meet Expectations" (DNME) category. The total mean score (M = 7.70/24) also depicts a major disparity between students' present performance and the required competency threshold, in both interactive and autonomous speaking activities. Evidentially, the low scores are not contained anomalies, since the minimum standard deviations for all sub-indicators in Table 2 are substantiated. The fact that participants consistently score low shows that these deficits are indicative of broader educational problems rather than isolated individual differences. In order to assure the scientific rigor of the results, the analysis was seconded and validated by a strong Inter-rater reliability of 0.97 (ICC = 0.97), which ensures that the gaps identified are based on objective and consistent assessment standards.

The results are in conformity with the existing literature. This depicts that traditional teacher-centered approaches like the Grammar-Translation-Method (GTM) are not effective in raising communicative skills (Soomro, 2025). The results indicate that the engagement with English has been mainly theoretical with no chance for considerable spoken practice even after years of formal training.

It appears that the public sector education system's culture of examination is more focused on written performance than vocal communication. As a result, students become familiar with the knowledge they have remembered, but glaring gaps arise when they have to use language spontaneously in real conversational situations.

Gaps in Subskills and the Role of Cognitive and Affective Factors

Large variances in sub-indicators point to the nature of the proficiency problem. The 62% disparity in Language Control implies a serious problem with grammatical correctness in spontaneous speaking. Similarly, 59.3% vocabulary gap suggests that children do not have the needed lexical range for the efficient communication. The chief differences are seen when the PALS sub-indicators are additionally separated. The prominent difference between two subskills was observed in Language Control ($M = 1.17$ and 1.14), depicting that students have issues with the correct use of grammatical structures in everyday speech. This indicates that learners may possess declarative knowledge of grammar but struggle to proceduralize this knowledge in communicative circumstances. Precise, real-time speaking & communication is mentally demanding for these learners. These findings could be valuable for future education systems that focus on fluidity and comprehensibility above high grammatical correctness.

Low mean scores for Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehensibility further show that the learners are experiencing problems in learning grammar & vocabulary and producing continuous speech. The results can be understood from the viewpoint of cognitive load, where students find it difficult to process several components of speech at the same time.

The effective parts are also important. The hesitancy and limited verbal production are consistent with studies on speaking anxiety among Pakistani students (Rajpar et al., 2026). When classroom environments emphasize on error corrections rather than expressive expression, students may feel hesitant to participate in speaking activities, which can lemmatize opportunities for useful verbal practice and skill growth.

Gaps in Independent Output and Lack of Scaffolding

We also observe similar inequalities for interactive (conversation) and independent (monologue) speaking skills. The low mean score of Task Completion ($M=1.35$ for monologue) indicates that the learners have trouble organizing and expressing their ideas on their own.

This shows that modern teaching methods, leave little room for the development of autonomous skills in language creation on the part of the students. Students can learn from reading and listening activities, but there appears to be negligible emphasis on structured output.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides an important explanatory perspective, as students may struggle to move beyond limited foundational speaking proficiency levels within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) without the presence of structured dialogue and collaborative scaffolding. This results in learners still being attached to memorized knowledge and finding it hard to produce spontaneous speech.

Conclusion

This diagnostic analysis reveals that most of the learners in secondary schools in Punjab, Pakistan are below the expected proficiency benchmark (ME) in English speaking proficiency. A total of 94 % students are below the required level of communicative competence. The analysis of subskills shows that such deficits are also identified in all parts of speaking, especially in Language Control, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehensibility. The greatest weaknesses were in Language Control and Vocabulary, followed by Comprehensibility, Pronunciation, Fluency and Task Completion. The results show that a significant amount of the predicted speaking competency standard is not reached in several areas of oral communication. From this diagnostic evidence, it is evident that learners find it challenging to apply their linguistic knowledge in real-time conversation, indicating a mismatch between theoretical learning and practical language use.

The findings also indicate that the gaps are attributed to both cognitive and affective aspects and the less possibilities for independent and interactive speaking impede the students' growth.

Overall, the results indicate the need for a change in teaching techniques. Traditional approaches that rely mostly on memorizing and written evaluation seem to be insufficient for developing speaking ability. On the other hand, there is a definite need for instructional frameworks that foster active participation, interaction, and the structured use of language. This diagnostic analysis by empirically identifying these proficiency gaps provides a valuable basis for future pedagogical interventions such as the Content and Language Integrated Modular Approach (CLIMA) that will aim at bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and functional oral communication.

Implications of the Study

This diagnostic study has major implications for the future of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Pakistan. The persistent gaps in proficiency, firstly indicate that the current failure of students to speak English is a methodological problem and suggest the need to move from "teacher-centered" rote learning to "student-centered" interactive modules to achieve advances in fluency. Secondly, the loss in Language Control means that learners lack the 'internalized' grammar necessary for spontaneous speech. Finally, the study argues for a change in assessment policies so that oral communication is openly assessed and hence given priority in the secondary school curriculum.

Recommendations

Based on the diagnostic findings, the following recommendations are offered for educational stakeholders:

- **Curriculum Integration:** The Punjab Textbook Board should expressly include speech-oriented activities such as dialogues and role-plays in the standard syllabus to bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- **Adoption of Modular Frameworks:** Schools may consider employing organized modular interventions like the CLIMA framework to provide the essential support for learners in mixed-ability classrooms.
- **Teacher Professional Development:** Specialized training programs should be established to train educators to conduct interactive speaking tasks and apply standardized rubrics for objective evaluation.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the research being meticulously designed, many challenges remain. Therefore, the findings cannot be projected to male students or to rural areas because the study was restricted to a sample of only female students in the ninth grade from a single public sector school in Lahore. The scope of the current research is restricted to speaking proficiency, and it does not investigate the effects on other language skills such as reading, writing, or any other proficiency.

This research should be conducted on a larger and more diverse scale, it should encompass a sample of private sector institutions across Pakistan, according to the authors, who strongly recommend that the scope of this research be expanded upon for future studies. It is also necessary to conduct additional research in order to monitor the long-term retention of speaking skills. It is possible that more insights can be obtained on the basis of proficiency disparities if in-depth studies are conducted on the relationship between psychological barriers such as fear of speaking and certain linguistic sub-indicators. In order to remove these barriers in the classroom, it is not enough to simply pass tests. This marks the beginning of the process of equipping graduates of public schools with the actual communicative power that is necessary in today's interdependent global economy.

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