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Challenges In Speaking English Among University Students in Pakistan: Voices of Students and Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Although English is the medium of instruction in Pakistani universities and is taught from the early school years, many university students remain unable to speak it fluently and confidently. This qualitative study explored the challenges university students in Pakistan face in speaking English from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Using an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants from six universities in Lahore, three public and three private: 18 undergraduate students (three from each university) and 12 English language teachers (two from each university), selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, which produced 24 themes across six objectives. Students identified speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes, thinking in Urdu and translating, limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties and pronunciation concerns as their main challenges. They traced these to limited exposure and practice, Urdu-medium and grammar-translation schooling, exam-oriented teaching and peer judgement. Teachers confirmed low confidence as the central challenge and highlighted differences by educational background, as well as curricula and assessments that neglect speaking, large classes, teacher-centered methods and a lack of resources and training. Public-university participants more often reported Urdu-medium backgrounds, large classes and limited resources, whereas private-university students relied more on media and technology for self-practice. Both groups recommended communicative activities, low-anxiety classrooms, assessment of speaking and institutional support. The study concludes that speaking challenges are not only linguistic but also psychological, pedagogical and socio-cultural, and calls for speaking-focused curricula and teacher training in Pakistani universities.

Keywords: *English speaking skills, speaking anxiety, university students, teachers' perspectives, public and private universities, qualitative study, Pakistan.*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

English holds a special position in Pakistan. It is an official language alongside Urdu and the language of government, law, business, the media and higher education, and proficiency in English is closely linked to academic success, employment and social mobility. In the universities, the primary language of instruction is English and students are expected to have to make presentations, participate in discussion, attend Vivas and job interviews and communicate with an increasingly global world in English. Speaking is generally regarded as the most important language skill for real communication and the most challenging one for L2 learning (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) due to the requirement that the

learner must coordinate and integrate all the language elements of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency in real time.

Although English is taught as a compulsory language from the beginning of school, many of the students at the university can't speak English fluently and confidently. The education system in Pakistan follows linguistic segmentation – most of the public schools teach Urdu or local languages while most of the private schools are English medium of instruction (Coleman, 2010). This means that the level of students' spoken English ability is not standardized when they enter universities. In many schools teaching has been based on the grammar translation approach, memorization and written tests with little emphasis on speaking. These students find themselves all of a sudden expected to engage in English as an active language and many have problems, anxiety and silence in university settings.

These challenges have been reported in Pakistan. Research conducted at the universities of Sindh, Punjab, and Karachi reveals linguistic issues (limited vocabulary and grammar mistakes), psychological issues (anxiety and fear of errors), and pedagogical issues (traditional teaching methods and lack of speaking practice) (Ahmedani et al., 2022; Kumar & Channa, 2024; Tayyab et al., 2023). One main concern that has arisen is language anxiety, especially writing (Ullah et al., 2025) found that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking language skill amongst 381 undergraduates from 3 Pakistan universities. But most studies are conducted among students only, usually questionnaires are used, or only one university is involved. Few have heard the voice of students and teachers, or have made any comparisons between students in public and private universities.

Statement of the Problem

Lahore is a major center of higher education in Pakistan, with large public universities and a growing number of private universities. Students in these institutions come from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds, ranging from Urdu-medium government schools to elite English-medium private schools. University teachers frequently report that many students remain silent in class, avoid presentations or speak hesitantly, even when they understand the content. Weak speaking skills limit students' participation in learning, their academic performance and their employability. Although many studies have identified the speaking problems of Pakistani students, there is limited in-depth qualitative evidence that brings together the voices of both students and teachers, and that compares public and private universities. Students can describe what they experience when they try to speak English, while teachers can explain the classroom, curricular and institutional factors that shape those experiences. Without understanding both perspectives, efforts to improve speaking skills may address only part of the problem. This study, therefore, explored the challenges in speaking English faced by university students in Lahore, the causes of these challenges and possible strategies to overcome them, from the perspectives of students and teachers in public and private universities.

Objectives of the Study

The research objectives of this study are presented as follows:

1. To explore the challenges university students, face while speaking English.
2. To identify the factors that students perceive as causes of their English-speaking challenges.
3. To explore the strategies students, use and suggest for overcoming their English-speaking challenges.
4. To explore teachers' perceptions of the English-speaking challenges faced by university students.
5. To identify the pedagogical and institutional factors that teachers believe contribute to students' English-speaking challenges.
6. To explore the strategies teachers, use and recommend for improving students' English-speaking skills.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What challenges do university students face while speaking English?
RQ2: What factors do students perceive as the causes of their English-speaking challenges?
RQ3: What strategies do students use and suggest to overcome their English-speaking challenges?
RQ4: How do teachers perceive the English-speaking challenges faced by university students?
RQ5: What pedagogical and institutional factors do teachers believe contribute to students' English-speaking challenges?
RQ6: What strategies do teachers use and recommend for improving students' English-speaking skills?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it brings together the voices of both students and teachers from public and private universities to give a complete picture of the challenges in speaking English, and its findings are useful for several stakeholders. For students, it shows that their difficulties in speaking English are shared by many others and are linked to identifiable causes, and it highlights practical strategies, such as rehearsal, peer practice and technology-based practice, that they can use to improve. For teachers, it offers a deeper understanding of the psychological and linguistic difficulties behind students' silence, and suggests classroom practices, such as pair work, task-based activities and gentle error correction, that can reduce anxiety and increase speaking opportunities. For policy and curriculum makers, including the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and university curriculum committees, it provides evidence to strengthen the speaking component of compulsory English courses and to include speaking in assessment. For university administrators, the findings, especially the differences between public and private universities, can guide investment in language labs, English clubs, smaller class sizes and professional development for English language teachers. Finally, for researchers, the study offers a two-perspective, cross-sector qualitative model that can be extended to other cities, levels of education and language skills.

Delimitations

- The study was delimited to six universities (three public and three private) in Lahore.
- Participants were undergraduate students and English language teachers only.
- The study focused on speaking skills, not on reading, writing or listening.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking as a Language Skill

Speaking is a productive skill that learners create and express meaning while speaking. According to Leong and Ahmadi (2017) speaking is one of the most crucial skills to develop and the main components of speaking are pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. In contrast to writing, speaking has limited opportunities for planning and correcting, and is done in public, meaning that it is very sensitive to the learner's emotions and confidence. The linguistic, psychological, pedagogical and social factors thus play a role in speaking performance.

Factors Affecting Speaking Skills

Linguistic factors involve vocabulary size, grammar, pronunciation and interference from L1. Students who think in their native language and translate to English tend to speak with a slow rate and stumble when speaking. Psychological factors are anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety as the factors of foreign language classroom anxiety and revealed that speaking in front of others was the most anxiety provoking. Pedagogical factors refer to teacher-

centered approaches, large classes, lack of speaking practice and assessment systems that do not emphasize speaking.

International Studies

Studies in many EFL contexts report similar challenges. In Vietnam, Tuan and Mai (2015) conducted a study in Vietnam to investigate the factors influencing students' speaking in the test environment including performance factors (time pressure), affective (motivation, anxiety), listening ability and topical knowledge. Al-Jamal (2014) discovered that students in Jordan were having problems speaking due to reliance on native language, lack of time for language acquisition, and large classes and inadequate practice. Based on previous studies, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) found that the issues that occurred in speaking activities were inhibition, nothing to say, low participation, and use of mother tongue. Both these studies indicate that speaking problems are caused by a combination of learners' internal states and the learning environment.

National Studies

In Pakistan, Ahmedani et al. (2022) examined the language problems of the undergraduate students of the University of Sindh both from public and private schools, and categorized the language problems into linguistic, psychological and pedagogical, which included the untrained teachers, problems in teaching methods and the problems in the language syllabus. Tayyab et al. (2023) conducted interviews with the students of a private university at Lahore and found that inadequate exposure and opportunities to speak was the most reported problem followed by grammatical difficulty, vocabulary and pronunciation problems, fear and low confidence. Kumar and Channa (2024) conducted a needs analysis of speaking problems among students at an engineering university in Sindh.

Language anxiety has been a topic of special concern. Ullah et al. (2025) reported moderate overall anxiety level among 381 undergraduate students of Pakistan, where the most prominent domains were speaking and classroom anxiety. In the Pakistani classroom, Ahmad et al. (2023) investigated the anxiety level of the ESL students in terms of the four language skills. A teacher-centered qualitative study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2024) revealed that the students' speaking anxiety was influenced by their educational background, unfamiliar teaching methods and fear of being evaluated, and that there were differences between the students of the matriculation and Cambridge systems. Shahid et al. (2026) confirmed that the main challenges that low-proficiency undergraduate students faced were stage fright, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence, while teacher-centered classes, crowded classrooms, and English-only instruction increased anxiety.

Research Gap

The literature shows that Pakistani university students face linguistic, psychological and pedagogical challenges in speaking English. However, most studies have collected data from students only, relied mainly on questionnaires, or focused on a single institution. Studies that combine the voices of students and teachers are rare, and few have compared public and private universities in the same city. This study addresses these gaps through in-depth interviews with students and teachers from three public and three private universities in Lahore.

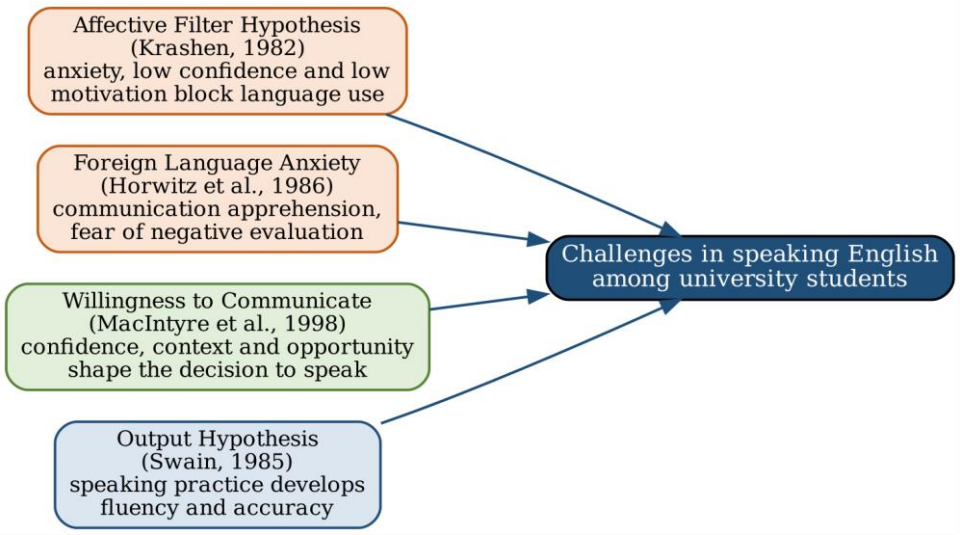
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by four complementary perspectives (Figure 1). Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that negative emotions such as anxiety, low confidence and low motivation act as a "filter" that blocks language acquisition and use. Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of foreign language anxiety explains how communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation make speaking in class especially stressful. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) Willingness to Communicate model explains that whether a learner chooses to speak depends on confidence, motivation and the situation, not only on

linguistic ability. Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis argues that learners develop fluency and accuracy by producing language, so a lack of speaking opportunities limits development. Together, these perspectives suggest that speaking challenges arise from the interaction of emotions, opportunities and practice, and they informed the interview questions and the interpretation of the findings.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of the Study

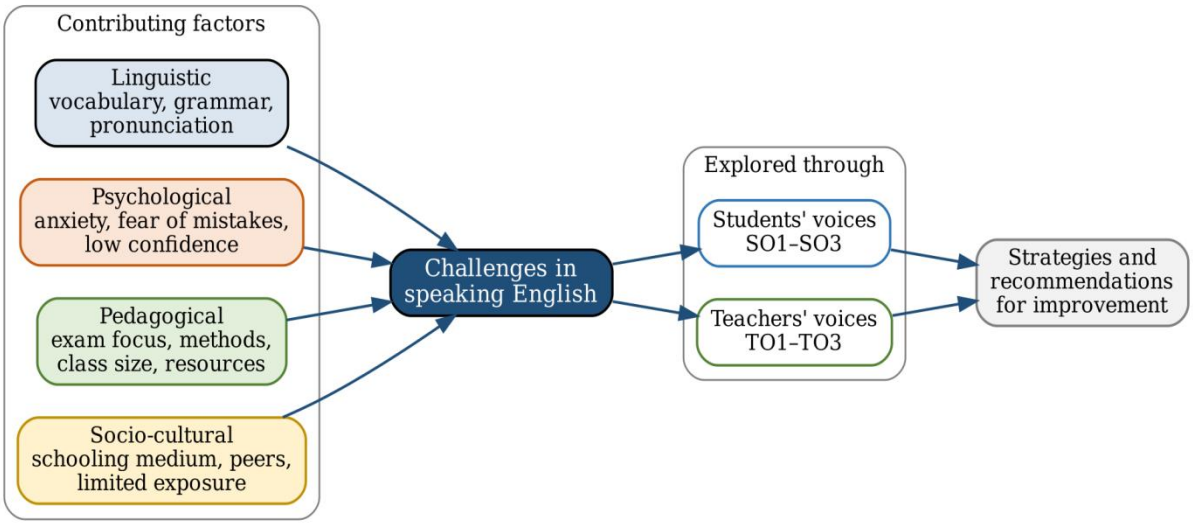


Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework. Linguistic, psychological, pedagogical and socio-cultural factors are assumed to contribute to students' challenges in speaking English. These challenges were explored through the voices of students (SO1–SO3) and teachers (TO1–TO3), leading to strategies and recommendations for improvement.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the Study



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

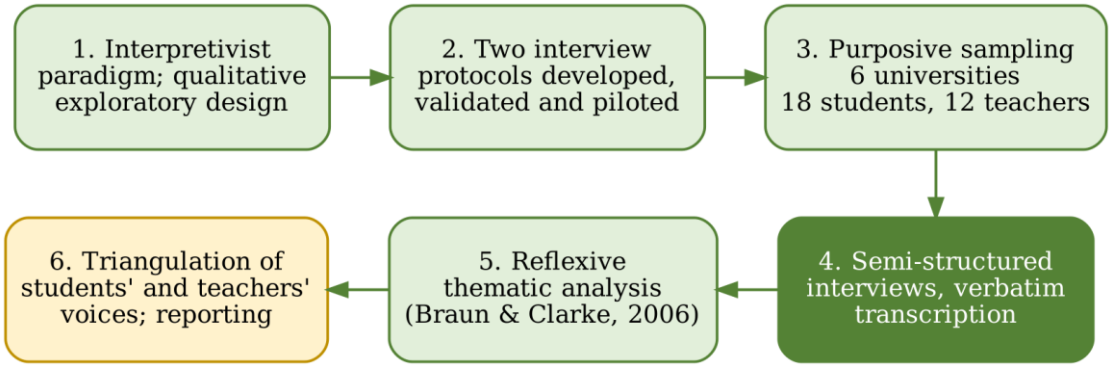
The study was based on the interpretivist paradigm. According to Interpretivism, reality is socially constructed, it is experienced differently by different people, and knowledge is constructed when one understands what is happening to one's participants and their meanings and perspectives. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the challenges of speaking English are experienced personally and interpreted differently by students and teachers, this paradigm was appropriate for understanding these experiences in depth.

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory design was used. Qualitative research is suitable when the aim is to understand participants' experiences, perceptions and meanings in their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An exploratory design allowed the researcher to investigate the challenges of speaking English in depth, to include two groups of participants (students and teachers) for triangulation, and to compare public and private universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Figure 3 summarizes the research process.

Figure 3

Research Design and Process of the Study



Population

The population comprised all undergraduate students and English language teachers of public and private universities recognized by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Lahore, Pakistan.

Sample and Sampling Technique

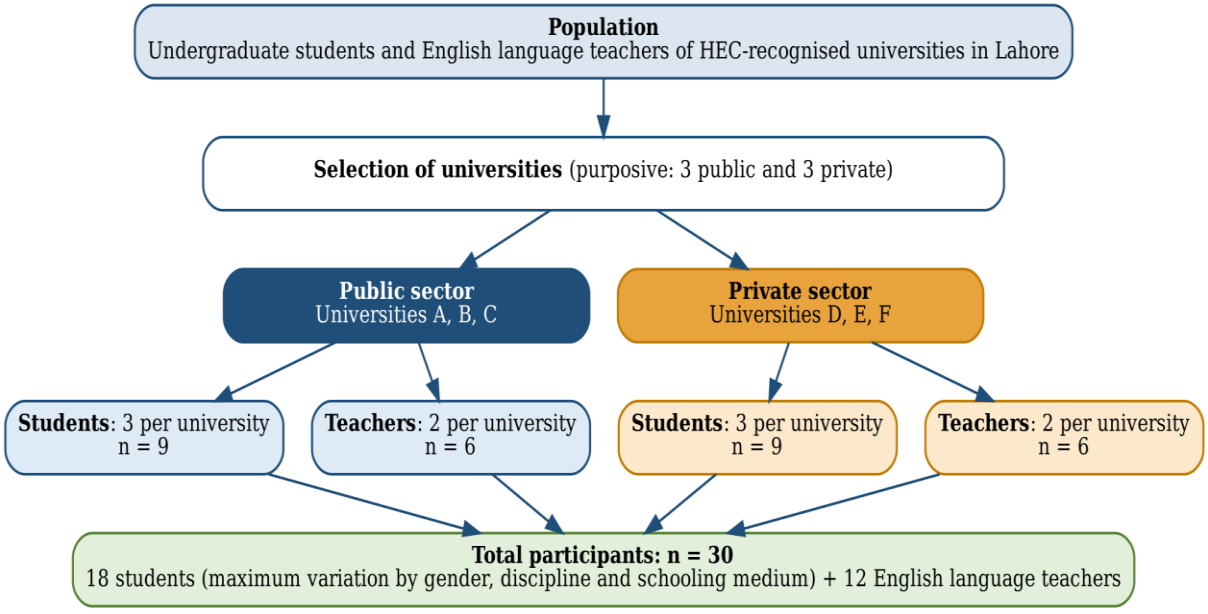
A purposive sampling technique was used at two levels. First, six universities were purposively selected: three public universities (referred to as Universities A, B and C) and three private universities (Universities D, E and F). Universities were anonymized to protect institutional confidentiality. Second, within each university, participants were selected through maximum-variation purposive sampling to include different genders, disciplines and schooling backgrounds (Urdu-medium and English-medium).

From each university, three undergraduate students and two English language teachers were interviewed. The final sample therefore consisted of 30 participants: 18 students (9 public, 9 private) and 12 teachers (6 public, 6 private). Students had completed at least one year of university study and had taken a compulsory English course; teachers had at least five years of experience teaching English

at the university level. Data saturation was reached, as no new themes emerged in the final interviews, which is consistent with evidence that most themes emerge within the first 12 interviews in a group (Guest et al., 2006). Figure 4 shows the sampling framework.

Figure 4

Sampling Framework of the Study



Research Instruments

Two semi-structured interview protocols were developed: one for students (Appendix A) and one for teachers (Appendix B). Each protocol contained an opening script, warm-up questions, and three sections aligned with the three objectives and research questions for that group, with sub-questions and probes. The protocols were reviewed by three experts in English language teaching and qualitative research for content validity and clarity, and each was piloted with one student and one teacher who were not part of the final sample. Minor changes were made to the wording and order of questions after piloting.

Data Collection

Permission was obtained from the heads of the relevant departments in each university. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave written consent. Interviews were conducted face to face at each university in a quiet room. Student interviews lasted 25–40 minutes and teacher interviews 30–45 minutes. Participants could speak in English, Urdu or a mixture of both; most students preferred Urdu or a mixture, which allowed them to express their experiences freely. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary, and a sample of translations was checked by a bilingual colleague.

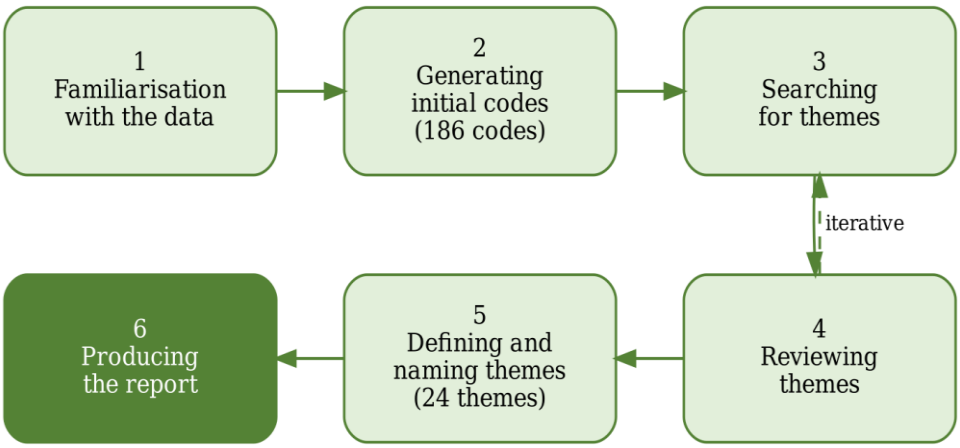
Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six phases (Figure 5): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Student and teacher data were

first analyzed separately for each objective and then compared to identify points of agreement and difference. Frequencies were recorded to show how many participants from public and private universities expressed each theme; these frequencies indicate the prevalence of themes and are not statistical measures. Table A shows an example of the coding process.

Figure 5

Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis



Note. Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Table A

Example of the Coding Process

Raw data extract	*Initial codes*	*Sub-theme*	*Theme*
"When the teacher calls my name, my heart starts beating fast and I forget everything I prepared." (ST04)	Physical nervousness; forgetting prepared content	Nervousness in presentations and vivas	Speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes
"I make the sentence in Urdu first, then I translate it, and by then the conversation has moved on." (ST02)	Mental translation; delayed response	Mental translation while speaking	Thinking in Urdu and translating
"With seventy students in ninety minutes, how can I give each student a chance to speak?" (TE02)	Overcrowded class; time pressure	Sixty or more students in a class	Large classes and limited time

Note. Illustrative extracts.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria (Table B).

Table B

Strategies Used to Ensure Trustworthiness

Criterion	*Strategies used in this study*
Credibility	Triangulation of students' and teachers' perspectives and of public and private universities; member checking of interview summaries; peer debriefing
Transferability	Thick description of the context, participants and findings; maximum-variation sampling
Dependability	Audit trail of all research decisions; consistent use of interview protocols; independent review of a sample of codes
Confirmability	Reflexive journal; use of verbatim quotations; clear links between data, codes and themes

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. Students were assured that their participation would not affect their grades. Codes were used instead of names (ST01–ST18 for students and TE01–TE12 for teachers), and universities were anonymized as Universities A–F. Recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Profile of Participants

Tables 1 and 2 present the profile of the 18 students and 12 teachers, and Figure 6 summarizes the composition of the sample. Students represented a range of disciplines; six of the nine public-university students had studied in Urdu-medium schools, compared with three of the nine private-university students. Teachers held MPhil or PhD degrees and had 5–18 years of teaching experience.

Table 1

Profile of Student Participants (n = 18)

Code	*University*	*Sector*	*Gender*	*Programme*	*Schooling medium*
ST01	A	Public	Male	BS Physics	Urdu
ST02	A	Public	Male	BS Economics	Urdu
ST03	A	Public	Female	BS English	English
ST04	B	Public	Female	BS Education	Urdu
ST05	B	Public	Female	BS Chemistry	Urdu
ST06	B	Public	Female	BS Sociology	Urdu
ST07	C	Public	Male	BS Commerce	Urdu
ST08	C	Public	Female	BS Psychology	English
ST09	C	Public	Male	BS Information Technology	English
ST10	D	Private	Male	BBA	English
ST11	D	Private	Female	BS Mass Communication	English

ST12	D	Private	Female	BS Software Engineering	Urdu
ST13	E	Private	Female	Pharm-D	English
ST14	E	Private	Male	BS Computer Science	English
ST15	E	Private	Male	BBA	Urdu
ST16	F	Private	Male	BS Civil Engineering	Urdu
ST17	F	Private	Female	BS English	English
ST18	F	Private	Female	BS Psychology	English

Note. Illustrative participant details.

Table 2

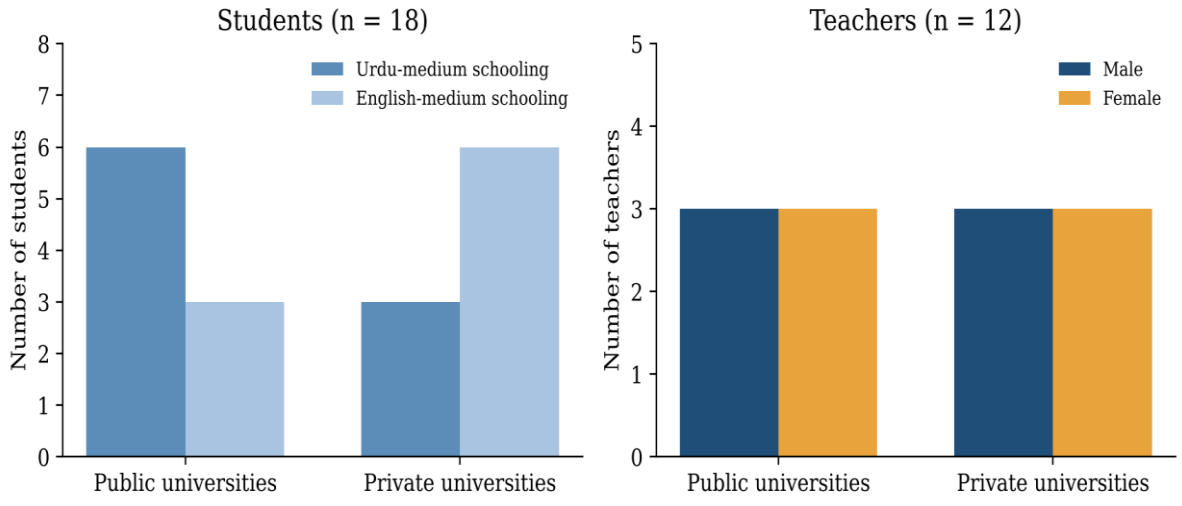
Profile of Teacher Participants (n = 12)

Code	*University*	*Gender*	*Qualification*	*Experience (years)*
TE01	A (public)	Male	PhD English (Linguistics)	15
TE02	A (public)	Female	MPhil English	9
TE03	B (public)	Female	PhD Applied Linguistics	12
TE04	B (public)	Male	MPhil English	7
TE05	C (public)	Male	PhD English (Literature)	18
TE06	C (public)	Female	MPhil Applied Linguistics	6
TE07	D (private)	Male	MPhil English	8
TE08	D (private)	Female	PhD TESOL	10
TE09	E (private)	Male	PhD Applied Linguistics	14
TE10	E (private)	Female	MPhil English	5
TE11	F (private)	Female	MPhil Applied Linguistics	7
TE12	F (private)	Male	PhD English (Linguistics)	11

Note. Illustrative participant details.

Figure 6

Composition of Student and Teacher Participants by University Sector



Findings from Students' Perspectives

SO1: Speaking challenges

Objective SO1: To explore the challenges university students face while speaking English.

Five themes described the challenges students face while speaking English (Table 3, Figure 7). Speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes was the most common theme (14 of 18 students). Students described racing hearts, blank minds and avoidance of eye contact, especially in presentations and viva examinations:

"When the teacher calls my name, my heart starts beating fast and I forget everything I prepared." *(ST04, public, female)*

Almost as common was thinking in Urdu and translating (13 students), which slowed students' responses and broke the flow of conversation. Students also reported limited vocabulary and word retrieval, difficulties with grammar and sentence formation, and pronunciation and accent concerns, the last often linked to comparing themselves with peers from elite English-medium schools. All five challenges were reported more often by public-university students.

Table 3

Themes, Sub-themes and Illustrative Quotations for SO1: Speaking challenges

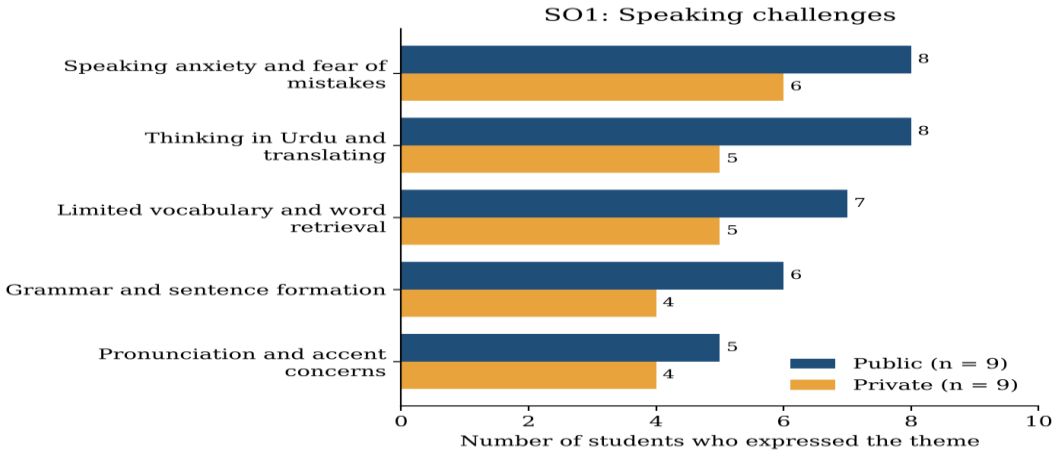
Theme	*Sub-themes*	*Illustrative quotation*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes	• Fear of being laughed at • Nervousness in presentations and vivas	"When the teacher calls my name, my heart starts beating fast and I forget everything I prepared." (ST04, public, female)	8/9	6/9	14/18
Thinking in Urdu and translating	• Mental translation while speaking • Slow responses in conversation	"I make the sentence in Urdu first, then I translate it, and by then the conversation has moved on." (ST02, public, male)	8/9	5/9	13/18
Limited vocabulary and word retrieval	• Forgetting words while speaking • Repeating the same simple words	"I know many words when I read, but when I speak, they disappear from my mind." (ST13, private, female)	7/9	5/9	12/18
Grammar and sentence formation	• Tense errors • Incomplete or broken sentences	"I always think whether I should say 'did' or 'done', and then I stop in the middle." (ST07, public, male)	6/9	4/9	10/18
Pronunciation and accent concerns	• Mispronouncing words	"Some students speak with a polished accent, so I feel my	5/9	4/9	9/18

	• Fear of judgement about accent	pronunciation is not good enough." (ST16, private, male)

Note. Frequencies show the number of students from public (n = 9) and private (n = 9) universities who expressed each theme. Quotations are illustrative.

Figure 7

Frequency of Themes for SO1 by University Sector



SO2: Causes of challenges

Objective SO2: To identify the factors that students perceive as causes of their English-speaking challenges.

Four themes captured the causes that students perceived (Table 4, Figure 8). Lack of speaking practice and exposure was mentioned by 14 students, who explained that they rarely used English outside the classroom. The clearest difference between sectors was Urdu-medium and grammar-translation schooling, mentioned by eight public-university students but only three private-university students:

"In school our English teacher explained everything in Urdu; we only memorized answers for the exam." *(ST01, public, male)*

Students also blamed exam-oriented teaching focused on writing, in which speaking was never assessed, and peer judgement and social perceptions of English, as classmates sometimes mocked those who spoke English or accused them of "showing off."

Table 4

Themes, Sub-themes and Illustrative Quotations for SO2: Causes of challenges

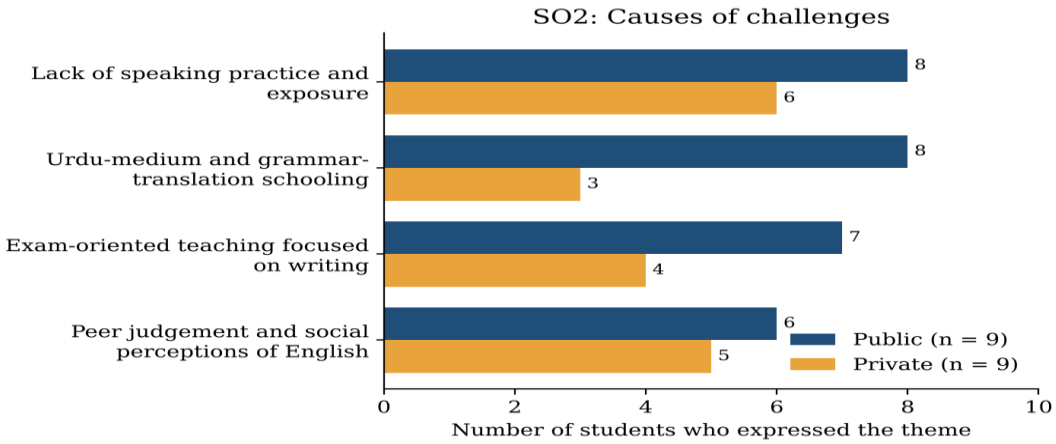
Theme	*Sub-themes*	*Illustrative quotation*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Lack of speaking practice and exposure	• No English environment at home	"Outside the classroom nobody speaks English with me, so where can I practice?" (ST05, public, female)	8/9	6/9	14/18

	• Few speaking opportunities in class				
Urdu-medium and grammar-translation schooling	• Rote learning of grammar rules • English taught in Urdu	"In school our English teacher explained everything in Urdu; we only memorized answers for the exam." (ST01, public, male)	8/9	3/9	11/18
Exam-oriented teaching focused on writing	• Speaking not assessed • Focus on marks and written answers	"We were never tested on speaking, so nobody took it seriously." (ST08, public, female)	7/9	4/9	11/18
Peer judgement and social perceptions of English	• Mocking by classmates • English seen as showing off	"If I speak English with friends, they say 'look, she is acting like a big shot.'" (ST11, private, female)	6/9	5/9	11/18

Note. Frequencies show the number of students from public (n = 9) and private (n = 9) universities who expressed each theme. Quotations are illustrative.

Figure 8

Frequency of Themes for SO2 by University Sector



SO3: Strategies and suggestions

Objective SO3: To explore the strategies students use and suggest for overcoming their English-speaking challenges.

Students described four strategies and suggestions (Table 5, Figure 9). Self-practice through media and technology was the most common strategy among private-university students (8 of 9), who watched English films and podcasts and practiced with mobile apps and AI conversation tools. Students in both sectors emphasized preparation and rehearsal, such as practicing presentations in front of a mirror. Many called for supportive teachers and dedicated speaking courses, and some described the value of peer practice and English clubs:

"Joining the debating society changed me; now I can at least stand and speak." *(ST15, private, male)*

Table 5

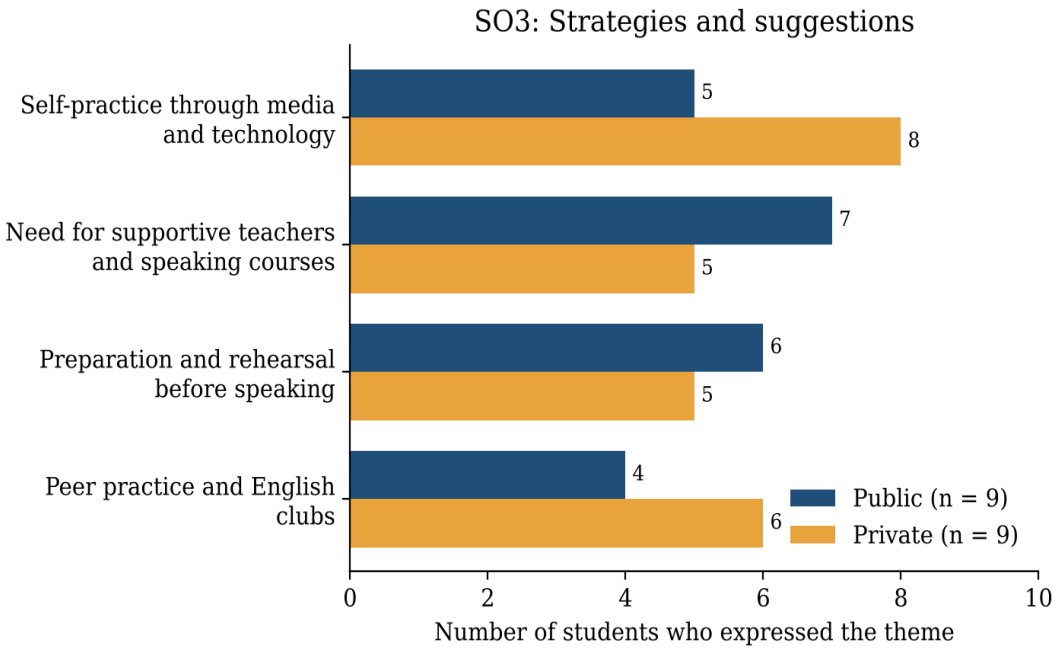
Themes, Sub-themes and Illustrative Quotations for SO3: Strategies and suggestions

Theme	*Sub-themes*	*Illustrative quotation*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Self-practice through media and technology	• Movies, podcasts and YouTube • Apps and AI conversation tools	"I watch English dramas with subtitles and practice speaking with an app at night." (ST14, private, male)	5/9	8/9	13/18
Need for supportive teachers and speaking courses	• Encouraging rather than correcting harshly • Dedicated speaking courses	"If the teacher smiles and helps instead of pointing out every mistake, we will speak more." (ST06, public, female)	7/9	5/9	12/18
Preparation and rehearsal before speaking	• Writing notes before presentations • Practicing in front of a mirror	"Before every presentation I practice in front of the mirror two or three times." (ST17, private, female)	6/9	5/9	11/18
Peer practice and English clubs	• Speaking with friends • Debating and English societies	"Joining the debating society changed me; now I can at least stand and speak." (ST15, private, male)	4/9	6/9	10/18

Note. Frequencies show the number of students from public (n = 9) and private (n = 9) universities who expressed each theme. Quotations are illustrative.

Figure 9

Frequency of Themes for SO3 by University Sector



Findings from Teachers' Perspectives

TO1: Teachers' perceptions of challenges

Objective TO1: To explore teachers' perceptions of the English-speaking challenges faced by university students.

Three themes described teachers' perceptions of students' speaking challenges (Table 6, Figure 10). Eleven of the 12 teachers identified low confidence and anxiety as the main challenge, observing that many students knew the answers but remained silent. Teachers in both sectors highlighted differences by educational background, describing classes that mixed fluent students from elite English-medium schools with students who had never spoken English before:

"In the same class I have students from elite schools and students who have never spoken English before." *(TE09, private, male)*

Teachers also described weak fluency and limited vocabulary, with students relying on short memorized phrases and struggling with follow-up questions.

Table 6

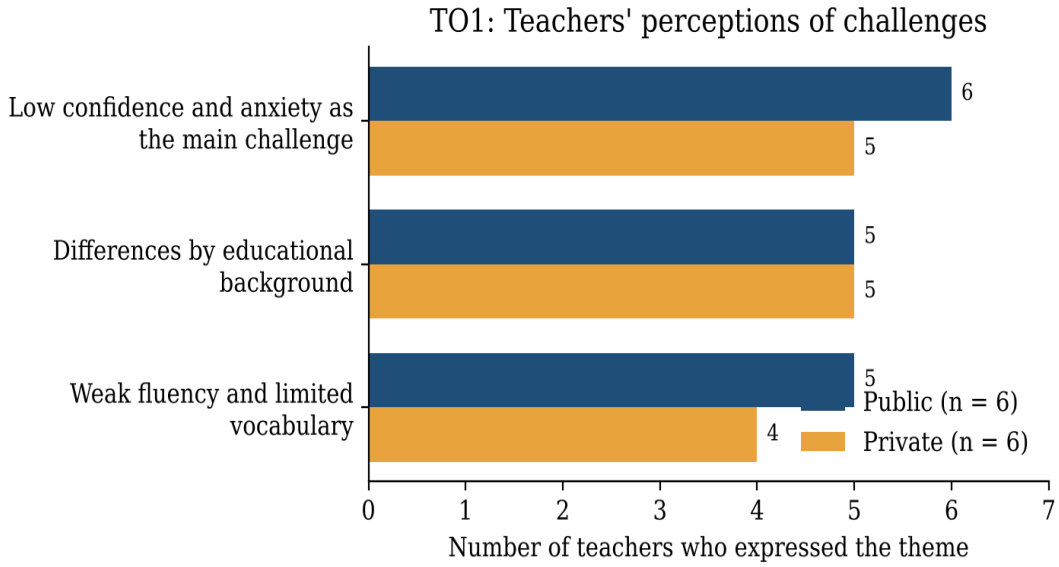
Themes, Sub-themes and Illustrative Quotations for TO1: Teachers' perceptions of challenges

Theme	*Sub-themes*	*Illustrative quotation*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Low confidence and anxiety as the main challenge	• Silence and avoidance in class • Visible nervousness in presentations	"Many students know the answer, but they stay silent because they are afraid of making a mistake." (TE03, public, female)	6/6	5/6	11/12
Differences by educational background	• Urdu-medium versus English-medium students • Matriculation versus O/A-level background	"In the same class I have students from elite schools and students who have never spoken English before." (TE09, private, male)	5/6	5/6	10/12
Weak fluency and limited vocabulary	• Long pauses and fillers • Reliance on memorized phrases	"They speak in short memorized sentences; when I ask a follow-up question, they cannot continue." (TE05, public, male)	5/6	4/6	9/12

Note. Frequencies show the number of teachers from public (n = 6) and private (n = 6) universities who expressed each theme. Quotations are illustrative.

Figure 10

Frequency of Themes for TO1 by University Sector



TO2: Contributing factors

Objective TO2: To identify the pedagogical and institutional factors that teachers believe contribute to students' English-speaking challenges.

Teachers identified four pedagogical and institutional factors (Table 7, Figure 11). Curriculum and assessment neglecting speaking was mentioned by nine teachers, who explained that compulsory English courses focused on reading and writing, and speaking carried no marks. The largest sectoral differences concerned large classes and limited time (6 of 6 public versus 2 of 6 private teachers) and lack of resources and teacher training (5 versus 2):

"We have no language lab, and I was never trained to teach speaking; I teach the way I was taught." *(TE04, public, male)*

Several teachers also acknowledged teacher-centered methods and the use of Urdu in their own classrooms, recognizing that code-switching reduced students' need to use English.

Table 7

Themes, Sub-themes and Illustrative Quotations for TO2: Contributing factors

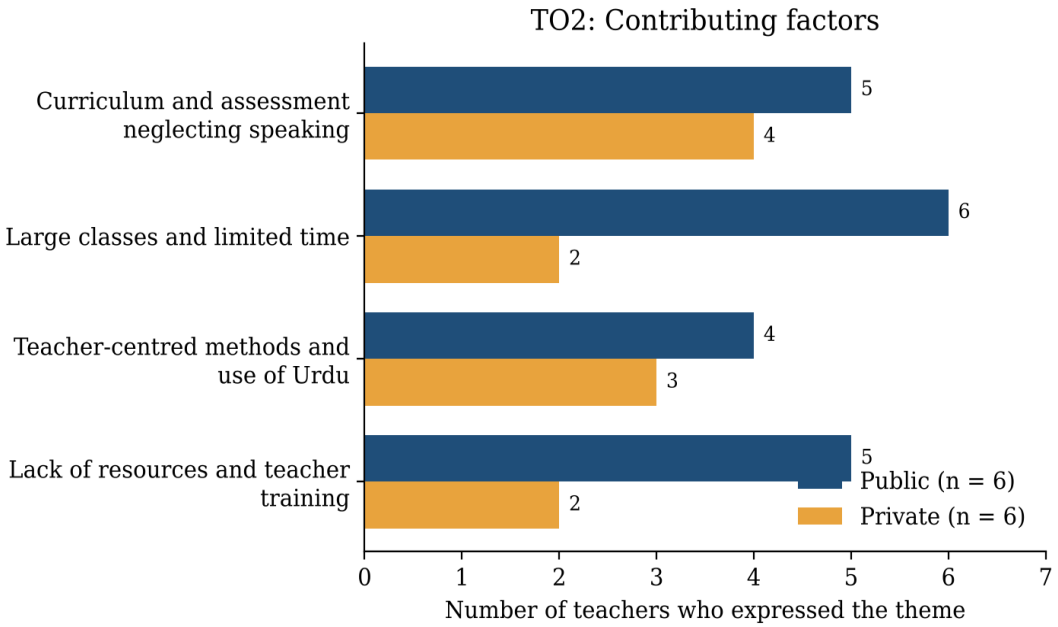
Theme	*Sub-themes*	*Illustrative quotation*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Curriculum and assessment neglecting speaking	• Courses focused on reading and writing • No formal speaking assessment	"Our compulsory English course is mostly comprehension and essay writing; speaking has no marks." (TE01, public, male)	5/6	4/6	9/12

Large classes and limited time	• Sixty or more students in a class • No time for individual speaking	"With seventy students in ninety minutes, how can I give each student a chance to speak?" (TE02, public, female)	6/6	2/6	8/12
Teacher-centred methods and use of Urdu	• Lecture-based teaching • Code-switching to Urdu for explanation	"Honestly, we also switch to Urdu when students look confused, and then they never need English." (TE10, private, female)	4/6	3/6	7/12
Lack of resources and teacher training	• No language labs • Little training in teaching speaking	"We have no language lab, and I was never trained to teach speaking; I teach the way I was taught." (TE04, public, male)	5/6	2/6	7/12

Note. Frequencies show the number of teachers from public (n = 6) and private (n = 6) universities who expressed each theme. Quotations are illustrative.

Figure 11

Frequency of Themes for TO2 by University Sector



TO3: Strategies and recommendations

Objective TO3: To explore the strategies teachers use and recommend for improving students' English-speaking skills.

Teachers described four strategies and recommendations (Table 8, Figure 12). Eleven teachers recommended communicative and task-based activities, particularly pair and group work, role-plays and presentations. Ten emphasized creating a low-anxiety classroom through gentle, delayed error correction and praise for effort:

"I do not correct every mistake immediately; I note common errors and discuss them later without names." *(TE06, public, female)*

Teachers also called for institutional support, including language labs, English clubs and teacher training, and for including speaking in assessment, arguing that students take seriously only what is assessed.

Table 8

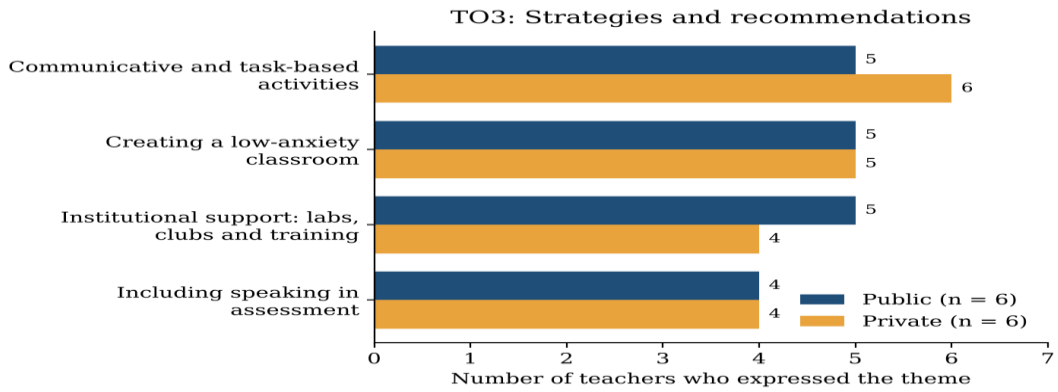
Themes, Sub-themes and Illustrative Quotations for TO3: Strategies and recommendations

Theme	*Sub-themes*	*Illustrative quotation*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Communicative and task-based activities	• Pair and group discussions • Role-plays and presentations	"Pair work works best; students who are silent in front of the class will talk to one partner." (TE08, private, female)	5/6	6/6	11/12
Creating a low-anxiety classroom	• Gentle and delayed error correction • Praising effort	"I do not correct every mistake immediately; I note common errors and discuss them later without names." (TE06, public, female)	5/6	5/6	10/12
Institutional support: labs, clubs and training	• Language labs and English clubs • Professional development for teachers	"Universities should invest in language labs and train teachers in communicative methods." (TE12, private, male)	5/6	4/6	9/12
Including speaking in assessment	• Marks for oral presentations • Speaking tests in English courses	"Students take seriously only what is assessed, so speaking must carry marks." (TE07, private, male)	4/6	4/6	8/12

Note. Frequencies show the number of teachers from public (n = 6) and private (n = 6) universities who expressed each theme. Quotations are illustrative.

Figure 12

Frequency of Themes for TO3 by University Sector

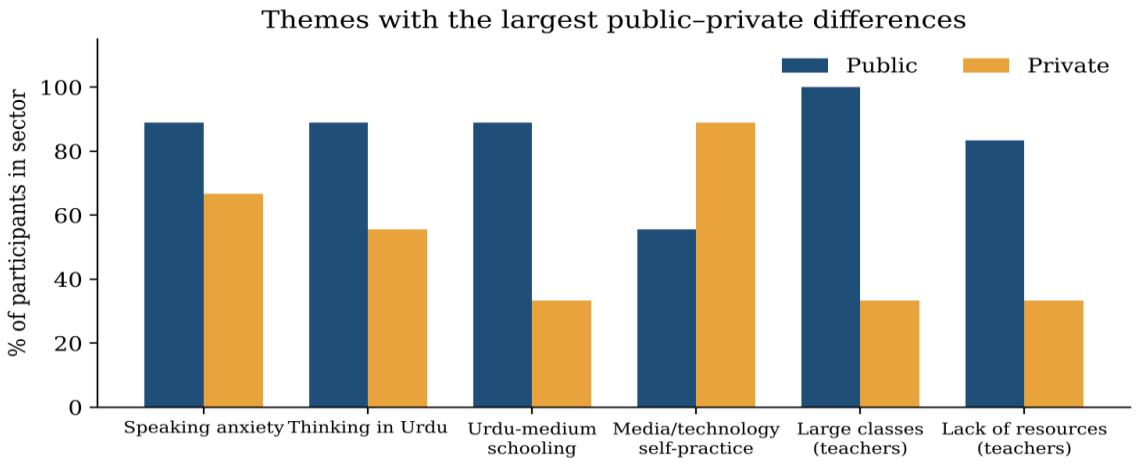


Comparison of Public and Private Universities

Figure 13 shows the themes with the largest differences between sectors. Public-university participants more often reported Urdu-medium schooling, thinking in Urdu, speaking anxiety, large classes and a lack of resources. Private-university students, many of whom came from English-medium schools, more often reported self-practice through media and technology and participation in clubs and societies. However, speaking anxiety, lack of exposure and a curriculum that neglects speaking were common in both sectors, showing that speaking challenges are not limited to public universities.

Figure 13

Themes with the Largest Differences between Public and Private Universities



Triangulation of Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

Table 9 compares the perspectives of students and teachers. The two groups agreed strongly on anxiety and low confidence as the central challenge, on the role of educational background, and on the need for more speaking practice. Students placed greater emphasis on their own linguistic difficulties and on peer judgement, while teachers placed greater emphasis on curriculum, assessment, class size and training.

Table 9

Thematic Table: Convergence and Divergence between Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

Area	*Students' perspective*	*Teachers' perspective*	*Convergence / divergence*
Psychological	Speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes (14/18)	Low confidence and anxiety as the main challenge (11/12)	Strong convergence
Linguistic	Thinking in Urdu (13/18); limited vocabulary (12/18); grammar (10/18); pronunciation (9/18)	Weak fluency and limited vocabulary (9/12)	Convergence; students give more detail on their own difficulties

Educational background	Urdu-medium and grammar-translation schooling (11/18)	Differences by educational background (10/12)	Strong convergence
Pedagogical and curricular	Exam-oriented teaching focused on writing (11/18)	Curriculum and assessment neglecting speaking (9/12); teacher-centred methods and Urdu (7/12)	Convergence; teachers acknowledge their own role
Institutional	Not prominent	Large classes (8/12); lack of resources and training (7/12)	Divergence; visible mainly to teachers
Social	Peer judgement and social perceptions of English (11/18)	Not prominent	Divergence; visible mainly to students
Solutions	Self-practice with technology; rehearsal; supportive teachers; clubs	Communicative tasks; low-anxiety classroom; assessment of speaking; institutional support	Complementary: individual and institutional strategies

Note. Figures in brackets show the number of participants who expressed the theme.

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Table 10 presents the main summary of all themes, and Figure 14 shows the prevalence of every theme as a percentage of participants in each group. Figure 15 presents the overall thematic map. Overall, the analysis produced 24 themes and 48 sub-themes: 13 themes from students and 11 from teachers.

Table 10

Main Table: Summary of Themes for All Objectives

Group	*Objective*	*Themes*	*Public*	*Private*	*Total*
Students (n = 18)	SO1: Speaking challenges	Speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes	8	6	14 (78%)
		Thinking in Urdu and translating	8	5	13 (72%)
		Limited vocabulary and word retrieval	7	5	12 (67%)
		Grammar and sentence formation	6	4	10 (56%)
		Pronunciation and accent concerns	5	4	9 (50%)

	SO2: Causes of challenges	Lack of speaking practice and exposure	8	6	14 (78%)
		Urdu-medium and grammar-translation schooling	8	3	11 (61%)
		Exam-oriented teaching focused on writing	7	4	11 (61%)
		Peer judgement and social perceptions of English	6	5	11 (61%)
	SO3: Strategies and suggestions	Self-practice through media and technology	5	8	13 (72%)
		Need for supportive teachers and speaking courses	7	5	12 (67%)
		Preparation and rehearsal before speaking	6	5	11 (61%)
		Peer practice and English clubs	4	6	10 (56%)
Teachers (n = 12)	TO1: Teachers' perceptions of challenges	Low confidence and anxiety as the main challenge	6	5	11 (92%)
		Differences by educational background	5	5	10 (83%)
		Weak fluency and limited vocabulary	5	4	9 (75%)
	TO2: Contributing factors	Curriculum and assessment neglecting speaking	5	4	9 (75%)
		Large classes and limited time	6	2	8 (67%)
		Teacher-centred methods and use of Urdu	4	3	7 (58%)
		Lack of resources and teacher training	5	2	7 (58%)
	TO3: Strategies and recommendations	Communicative and task-based activities	5	6	11 (92%)
		Creating a low-anxiety classroom	5	5	10 (83%)

	Institutional support: labs, clubs and training	5	4	9 (75%)
	Including speaking in assessment	4	4	8 (67%)

Note. Public and private students: n = 9 each; public and private teachers: n = 6 each.

Figure 14

Thematic Graph: Prevalence of All Themes among Students and Teachers

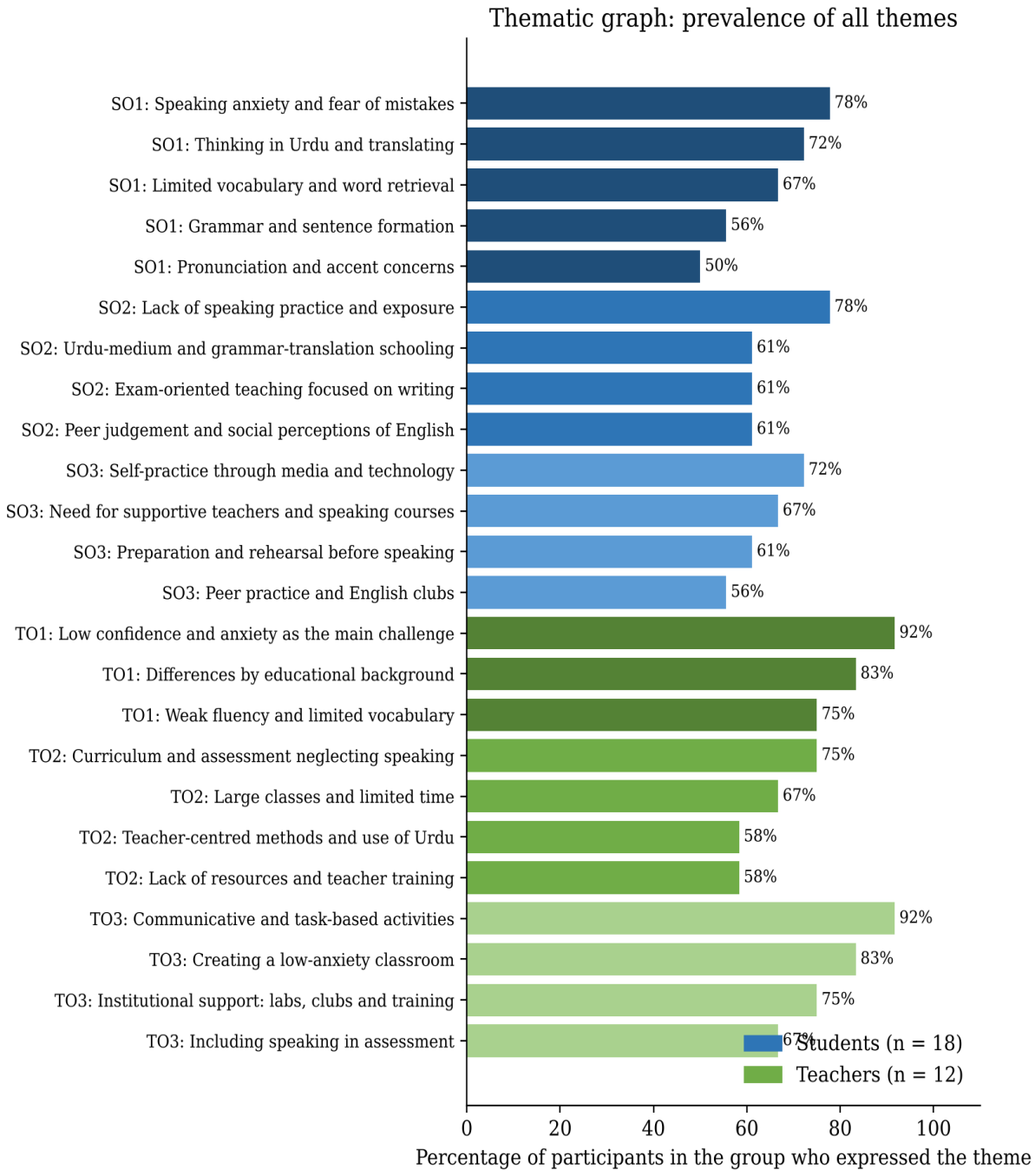


Figure 15

Thematic Map of Challenges in Speaking English



Findings of the Study

The main findings are presented in line with the objectives of the study.

1. The most common challenge students faced in speaking English was speaking anxiety and fear of making mistakes, reported by most students. A majority also described thinking in Urdu and translating into English while speaking. Many reported limited vocabulary and difficulty recalling words. More than half had difficulty with grammar and sentence formation, and about

half were concerned about their pronunciation and accent. All of these challenges were reported more often by students of public universities than by students of private universities.

2. Students attributed their challenges mainly to a lack of speaking practice and exposure to English, which most of them mentioned. More than half also pointed to three other causes. The first was their Urdu-medium and grammar-translation schooling, mostly mentioned by public-university students. The second was exam-oriented teaching that focused on writing rather than speaking. The third was peer judgement and negative social perceptions of people who speak English.

3. A majority of students used self-practice through media and technology, such as films, YouTube, mobile apps and AI conversation tools, to improve their speaking; this strategy was especially common among private-university students. Many students stressed the need for supportive teachers and dedicated speaking courses. More than half relied on preparation and rehearsal before speaking, and several valued peer practice, English clubs and debating societies.

4. Almost all teachers saw low confidence and speaking anxiety as the main challenge their students faced. Most teachers also noted clear differences in speaking ability according to students' educational background, especially between Urdu-medium and English-medium students. A majority observed weak fluency and limited vocabulary.

5. Teachers identified several pedagogical and institutional factors behind students' speaking challenges. A majority pointed out that curricula and assessment neglect speaking, as compulsory English courses focus mainly on reading and writing and give no marks for speaking. Many teachers described large classes and limited class time, which leave little opportunity for every student to speak; this problem was mentioned mainly by teachers in public universities. More than half acknowledged that teacher-centered methods and the frequent use of Urdu in English classes reduce students' need and opportunity to speak English. More than half also reported a lack of resources, such as language labs, and of training in teaching speaking skills, again mainly in public universities. Almost all teachers used and recommended communicative and task-based activities, such as pair work, group discussions and role-plays. Most emphasized creating a low-anxiety classroom through gentle error correction and encouragement. A majority called for institutional support through language labs, English clubs and teacher training. Many recommended including speaking in the assessment of English courses.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges in speaking English faced by university students in Lahore from the perspectives of students and teachers in public and private universities. The findings show that speaking challenges are multidimensional, involving psychological, linguistic, pedagogical and socio-cultural factors that interact with one another.

The most prominent finding is the central role of anxiety. Both pupils and teachers reported that the biggest obstacle was speaking anxiety and low speaking confidence and when asked to speak, pupils reported experiencing physiological responses and blanking out. This is in line with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) and Horwitz communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation (1986). This also aligns with the recent Pakistani study that identified speaking as the most anxiety-inducing language skill (Ullah et al., 2025) and that the anxiety is a key contributor in the problems of speaking (Shahid et al., 2026). Cited by teachers when students know the answer but don't speak it is an example of MacIntyre et al. (1998) that willingness to communicate is based on confidence and situation, not only on language skills.

The linguistic difficulties mentioned by the students (particularly thinking in Urdu and translation) parallel the previous studies conducted in Pakistan (Ahmedani et al., 2022; Tayyab et al., 2023) and with the findings of international studies which reported mother tongue interference (MTI) as a linguistic difficulty (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). All these challenges are closely tied up with the lack of practice that was named as the most important challenge by the students. Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis suggests that learners gain fluency through output, and a learner who does not speak English much in and out of class has limited opportunities to automate the vocabulary and grammar in his or her L2, which leads to the use of slow mental translation.

Education background was a major factor that was identified by both the students and teachers. This is because, according to Coleman (2010), language was divided in the education system in Pakistan with students of public universities having studied in Urdu language medium schools with English medium of instruction based on grammar translation and memorization. This is also in line with Ahmed et al. (2024) who discovered that there would be an inter-school difference in the anxiety level of students based on their schools. Classes with a mix of fluent and non-fluent speakers have been reported by teachers, which can lead to some feelings of anxiety for less confident speakers when they compare themselves with others.

This comparison of sectors provides a new dimension to Pakistani research. The teachers at public universities complained about large classes, and the lack of language labs and training, while students at private universities used technology and clubs for self-practice to a greater extent. But anxiety was widespread in both sectors as was low exposure and curriculum that focused on lacking speaking, implying that this is an issue of system not just public institutions.

The two perspectives were triangulated especially. Teachers hardly referred to students' own or peers' language deficits, personal or social issues being emphasized by students. Students were unaware of institutional factors like classes, training, curricula and assessment as highlighted by the teachers. Interestingly, teachers recognized the use of Urdu and teacher-centered approaches by themselves. The two groups recommended complementary strategies: students recommended individual practices and supportive teaching and teachers recommended communicative activities, low-anxiety classrooms, assessment and institutional support. It means that the improvement of speaking abilities needs to be done at the individual, classroom and institutional levels simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that university students in Lahore face significant challenges in speaking English, and that these challenges are not simply a matter of weak vocabulary or grammar. Speaking anxiety and fear of making mistakes lie at the center of the problem, reinforced by the habit of thinking in Urdu, limited exposure and practice, Urdu-medium and exam-oriented schooling, and peer judgement. Teachers confirm these challenges and add that curricula and assessments neglect speaking, classes are large, methods are often teacher-centered, and resources and training are limited, especially in public universities. Although private-university students have more opportunities and use technology more, anxiety and limited speaking practice affect students in both sectors. Improving English speaking skills in Pakistani universities therefore requires a combined effort by students, teachers and institutions to create more opportunities to speak in supportive, low-anxiety environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are aligned with the objectives of the study.

1. Teachers should reduce speaking anxiety by beginning with low-pressure activities, such as pair work and small groups, before whole-class presentations, and by giving students preparation time. Universities should offer vocabulary-building and pronunciation workshops for students who need extra support.

2. Universities should create regular opportunities to use English outside the classroom, such as English clubs, debating societies, conversation circles and English-speaking days. Teachers and student societies should promote a culture in which speaking English is encouraged rather than mocked, and in which mistakes are seen as part of learning.

3. Students should be guided to use films, podcasts, mobile applications and AI conversation tools for regular speaking practice, and to rehearse before presentations.

4. Teachers should assess students' speaking levels at the start of the course and provide differentiated support for students from Urdu-medium backgrounds.

5. The HEC and university curriculum committees should strengthen the speaking component of compulsory English courses and include speaking in assessment through presentations, oral tests and group discussions. Public universities should reduce class sizes in English courses where possible, and establish language labs.

6. Universities should provide professional development for English language teachers in communicative and task-based language teaching, and in creating low-anxiety classrooms through supportive error correction. Teachers should use English as the main language of interaction in English classes, using Urdu only strategically to support understanding.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was limited to 30 participants from six universities in Lahore, so the findings may not transfer to all Pakistani contexts. Data were based on self-reports in interviews, and no classroom observations were conducted. Future studies should include universities in other cities and rural areas, use classroom observation alongside interviews, and test the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as anxiety-reduction strategies or technology-based speaking practice, through experimental designs.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Students

Interview Information

Participant code: ST_____
University (code) and sector: Public / Private
Gender / programme / semester: _____
Medium of schooling: Urdu / English
Date, time and place: _____
Language of interview: Urdu / English / Both

Opening Script

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. I am studying the challenges university students face in speaking English. I would like to hear about your own experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, and you may answer in Urdu, English or both. The interview will take about 30–40 minutes and, with your permission, will be audio-recorded. Your name and university will not be identified, and you may skip any question or stop at any time. May I start the recording?

Warm-up Questions

- Please tell me about yourself and your programme of study?
- How do you feel about the English language in general?

Main Interview Questions

Research Objective 1 (SO1): To explore the challenges university students face while speaking English.

Research Question 1: What challenges do university students face while speaking English?

Sub-questions:

1.1 How do you feel when you have to speak English in class, in presentations or with others?

Probes: nervousness, fear, confidence; a specific example

1.2 What difficulties do you face while speaking English?

Probes: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency

1.3 Do you think in Urdu or English when you speak English? How does this affect your speaking?

1.4 In which situations are speaking English most difficult for you?

Probes: presentations, vivas, group discussions, interviews

1.5 Can you describe a moment when you could not express yourself in English?

Probes: what happened, how you felt

Research Objective 2 (SO2): To identify the factors that students perceive as causes of their English-speaking challenges.

Research Question 2: What factors do students perceive as the causes of their English-speaking challenges?

Sub-questions:

2.1 How was English taught in your school and college?

Probes: medium of instruction, methods, speaking practice

2.2 What opportunities do you have to speak English inside and outside the university?

Probes: home, friends, classroom

2.3 How do your classmates, family and society react when you speak English?

Probes: encouragement, mocking, "showing off"

2.4 In your opinion, what is the main reason students find it difficult to speak English?

Research Objective 3 (SO3): To explore the strategies students use and suggest for overcoming their English-speaking challenges.

Research Question 3: What strategies do students use and suggest to overcome their English-speaking challenges?

Sub-questions:

3.1 What do you do to improve your spoken English?

Probes: media, apps, AI tools, practice with friends

3.2 How do you prepare before speaking in class or giving a presentation?

3.3 What can teachers do to help students speak English with more confidence?

3.4 What should your university do to improve students' speaking skills?

Probes: speaking courses, clubs, language labs

Closing Script

"Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your experiences so openly. Your responses will be kept confidential. After I transcribe the interview, I may share a short summary with you to check that I have understood your views correctly. If you have any questions later, you can contact me at _____.

Thank you again."

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Teachers

Interview Information

Participant code: TE_____
University (code) and sector: Public / Private
Gender / qualification / teaching experience: _____
Date, time and place: _____
Language of interview: Urdu / English / Both

Opening Script

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. I am studying the challenges university students face in speaking English, from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Your experience of teaching English is very valuable for this study. The interview will take about 30–45 minutes and, with your permission, will be audio-recorded. Your name and university will remain confidential, and you may skip any question or stop at any time. May I start the recording?

Warm-up Questions

- Please tell me about your teaching experience and the English courses you teach.

Main Interview Questions

Research Objective 1 (TO1): To explore teachers' perceptions of the English-speaking challenges faced by university students.

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the English-speaking challenges faced by university students?

Sub-questions:

1.1 In your experience, what are the main challenges your students face in speaking English?

Probes: linguistic, psychological, situational

1.2 How do students behave when they are asked to speak English in class?

Probes: silence, avoidance, nervousness

1.3 How do students' speaking skills differ according to their educational background?

Probes: Urdu-medium vs English-medium; matriculation vs O/A-level

Research Objective 2 (TO2): To identify the pedagogical and institutional factors that teachers believe contribute to students' English-speaking challenges.

Research Question 2: What pedagogical and institutional factors do teachers believe contribute to students' English-speaking challenges?

Sub-questions:

2.1 How much attention do the curriculum and assessment give to speaking skills?

2.2 How do class size, time and teaching methods affect students' speaking?

2.3 What resources and training are available to you for teaching speaking?

Probes: language labs, workshops, materials

2.4 How often are English and Urdu used in your classes, and why?

Research Objective 3 (TO3): To explore the strategies teachers use and recommend for improving students' English-speaking skills.

Research Question 3: What strategies do teachers use and recommend for improving students' English-speaking skills?

Sub-questions:

3.1 Which activities have you found most effective in encouraging students to speak?

Probes: pair work, role-play, presentations, debates

3.2 How do you correct students' spoken errors, and how do you reduce their anxiety?

3.3 What changes in curriculum or assessment would improve students' speaking skills?

3.4 What support should universities provide to teachers and students?

Probes: labs, clubs, training, smaller classes

Closing Script

"Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your experiences so openly. Your responses will be kept confidential. After I transcribe the interview, I may share a short summary with you to check that I have understood your views correctly. Thank you again."