

Challenges of English as a Second Language (L2) Graduate Students, Linguistic Identities,  
and Decolonizing Pedagogy in Pakistani Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

*The intricate relationship between second language acquisition, identity construction, and pedagogical practices is regarded as critically significant within the specific context of English as a second language acquisition at Pakistani public universities, particularly at the graduate level. This study investigates the challenges faced by graduate students in learning English as a Second Language (L2) at public universities in Sindh, Pakistan, amidst the era of digitalization. Moreover, it explores their linguistic identities in relation to the critical language pedagogy (CLP) approach. The research examines the complex interplay between colonial legacies, classroom power dynamics, and their substantial impact on the linguistic confidence and access to knowledge of graduate students, framed within the theory of Critical Language Pedagogy. The findings elucidate the systemic disempowerment present in language practices. To this end, a quantitative survey was conducted, analyzing responses from 60 students across three public universities, utilizing closed-ended questions. The results indicate that culturally contextualized digital tools, such as Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), can effectively address linguistic marginalization and the suppression of knowledge. This study proposes recommendations for pedagogical tools aimed at decolonizing ESL classrooms in Pakistan, conducted through inclusive and student-centered language policies.*

**Key Terms:** Linguistic Identity, Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP), Epistemic Linguistic struggles, Education digitalization.

INTRODUCTION

English Language Education in Pakistan is shaped by its colonial history. It has created unequal Power dynamics that often exclude the marginalized voices from full epistemic participation. Rehman, T. (2020) examines how the legacy of British colonization left English as the language of power, governance, and academia in the Sub-continent and Pakistan. Furthermore, it entrenches its role in socio-economic advancement. In many Pakistani public universities, students from rural and underprivileged backgrounds face immense challenges in accessing quality English education. They are often required to abandon their

native languages in academic spaces, leading to linguistic insecurity and epistemic alienation. According to Tahseen et al. (2023), while English remains a gatekeeper to higher education and economic mobility, the current digital revolution offers a unique opportunity to reimagine ESL instruction.

Technologies like smartphones and mobile applications are increasingly becoming tools for language learning among youth in Pakistan. This study investigates how Pakistani ESL learners negotiate their linguistic and epistemic identities amid traditional classroom norms and explores the role of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) as a potential agent of educational transformation in a postcolonial context.

### **Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP): A Potential Solution**

Critical Language Pedagogy offers a valuable framework for both teaching and learning challenges in the classroom. CLP supports students and enhances critical thinking skills. Akhtar et al. (2021) emphasize the ways university instructors in Sindh utilize students' multilingual resources and local knowledge in their remedial English classes.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The section critically reviews key concepts, such as linguistic injustice, the decolonial framework in education, and the features of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in the Pakistani context of the education system in higher education. While doing this, the study identifies the current gaps in the literature which it aims to address.

### **Linguistic Injustice**

Linguistic injustice is how languages are unfairly excluded from recognition, specifically from institutional and educational settings. This results in unequal knowledge and opportunities (Clarke, M., 2022; Nasir, Mehmood, & Rehman, 2021). Those associated with that language are marginalized based on the language hegemony dilemma. Clarke, M. (2022) describes this as a form of discrimination that undermines the credibility of marginalized individuals as knowers. Similarly, Nasir et al. (2021) found that rural ESL students in Punjab faced systemic exclusion in higher education due to their linguistic backgrounds.

In the Pakistani education system, English-medium instruction often silences students who are not fluent in English, positioning them as less capable or intelligent. Maldonado-Torres (2007) criticized and said that such practices are rooted in colonial epistemologies that prioritize Western knowledge systems over indigenous ones.

### **Decolonial Theory and Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP)**

Decolonial theory challenges the Eurocentric Knowledge systems in Education. The concept supports the validation of local epistemologies (Smith et al. 2009). Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP), as proposed by Pennycook (2001), emphasizes social justice, critical awareness, and the inclusion of students' linguistic identities in language teaching. Both frameworks underscore the importance of resisting linguistic imperialism by empowering students through culturally responsive pedagogies. More recently, Rauf, A., & Bhatti, N. (2024) emphasize the need for linguistic democracy in Pakistani curriculum design. According to them, Pakistani Higher education teachers fail in integrating the regional languages in their teaching approaches. Therefore, the classrooms lack live experiences. The section critically addresses that while the theoretical frameworks are well developed, i.e., decolonial theory and CLP. However, the empirical studies applying these theories in digital ESL environments in Pakistan are limited.

### **Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)**

MALL involves the use of mobile devices to support language learning. In developing countries like Pakistan, where formal language instruction is often inadequate, MALL offers a flexible and accessible alternative. Kukulska-Hulme (2009) notes that mobile learning can foster learner autonomy and engagement. However, its effectiveness depends on the relevance of content to local linguistic and cultural contexts.

Similarly, Tahseen et al. (2023) noticed that Hybrid and digital modes of English teaching in Pakistan improved learners' engagement during the pandemic. Saeed & Shakir (2022) found that Urdu-English bilingual mobile apps increased vocabulary retention among rural ESL learners. Internationally, Kim & Karan (2021) demonstrated that MALL tools aligned with local cultures led to higher motivation among Korean university students, indicating the importance of contextualization.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopts a quantitative approach, including online surveys from 60 students of the public university in Sindh. It is to explore the complex interplay between language, identity, and pedagogy in ESL classrooms across diverse institutional settings.

#### **Research Questions**

The following are the research questions of the study.

1. Do linguistic struggles shape the learning experiences of ESL students in Pakistani Public universities? If yes, to what extent?
2. In what ways do teachers and classroom practices contribute to or mitigate these struggles?
3. Do Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) serve as a decolonial tool to support ESL learners in Pakistan?

#### **Participants and setting**

The research was conducted in three public universities in Sindh province, representing urban and rural areas. Participants included 60 ESL students, i.e., 20 students from each university. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity in socio-economic background and language proficiency. 30 female and 30 male students were chosen for the survey.

#### **Data Analysis Technique**

Data was collected through survey forms. Students from all three universities were asked to complete the survey forms. The closed-ended questions with a Likert scale examined students' experiences and coping strategies related to language learning.

#### **Validation of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire used in this study is self-developed. It was then administered through Google survey forms. The items in the questionnaire are based on research questions and a review of the literature, relating them to linguistic identity, second language learning challenges, and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in colonial and South Asian contexts such as Sindh. To ensure face and content validity, the initial draft of the survey was reviewed by 2 ESL instructors from a public university in Sindh. Their feedback was used to refine item clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

### Data Analysis and Findings

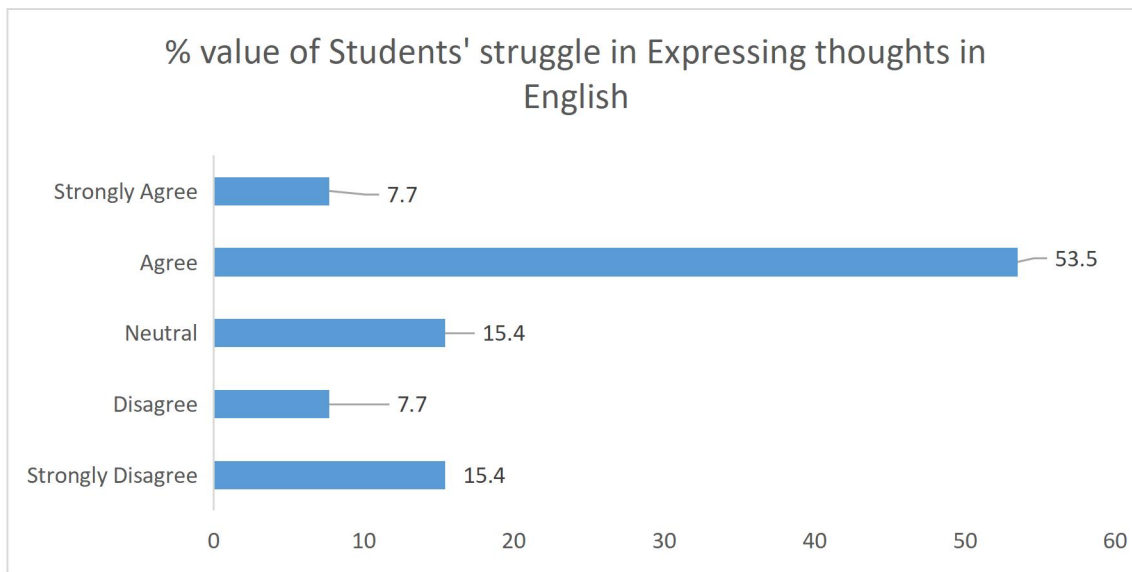
The section provides the key findings from online survey responses. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Data was analyzed using Google Survey Forms, and bars and graphs were drawn on MS. Word document to visualize the data.

Three dominant themes emerged:

#### Epistemic Suppression in English Classrooms

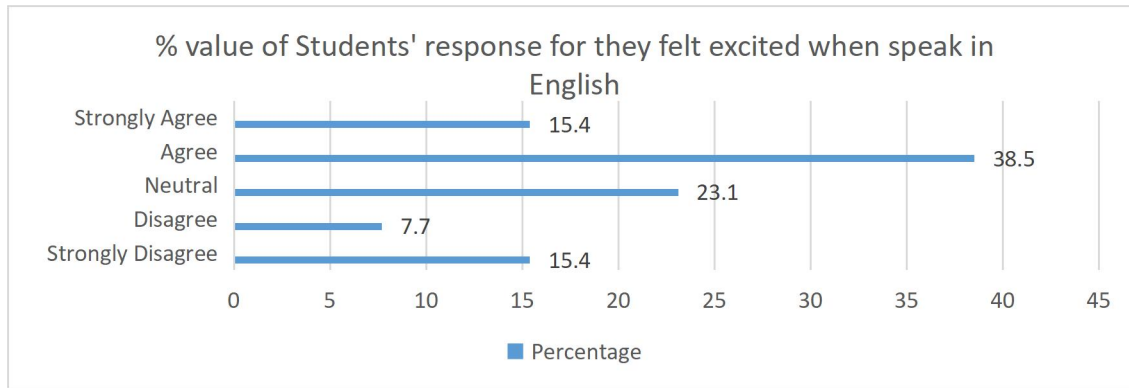
Many students reported struggling with expressing themselves in English, leading to classroom anxiety and reduced participation. For example, 53% of students agreed that expressing feelings and thoughts in English is challenging for them, as shown in Figure 4.1. Here, the bar represents their responses to the question of whether they struggle expressing their thoughts in English.

Figure 4.1: Confidence in expressing ideas in English



Other than that, a significant number of students reported anxiety. It typically hinders classroom learning and engagement. 38.5% of students agreed that they felt anxious when speaking English in class. However, the students of higher education in Sindh are reluctant to speak during class because of their limited English proficiency (see Figure 4.2).

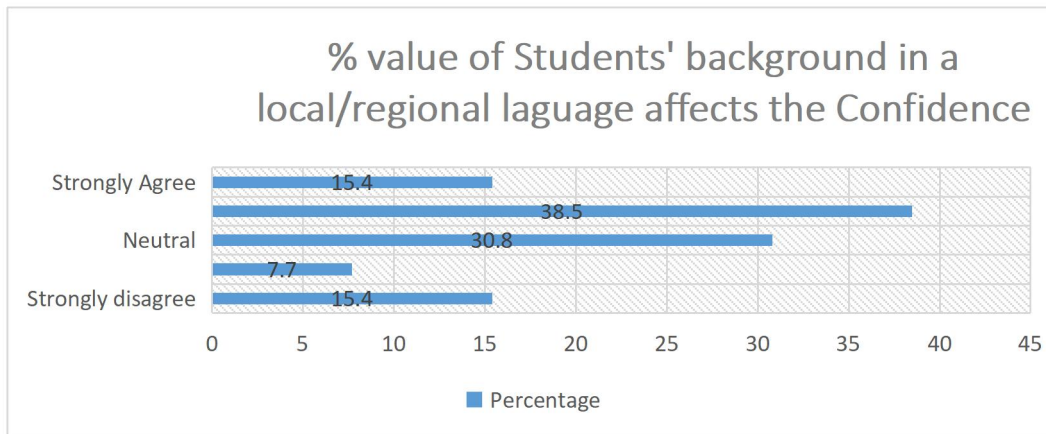
Figure 4.2: Graph Representation of Students' Responses Indicating Excitement in English-Speaking Contexts



The survey response also reveals that a significant proportion of students perceive their background in a local or regional language as a factor affecting their confidence in using English.

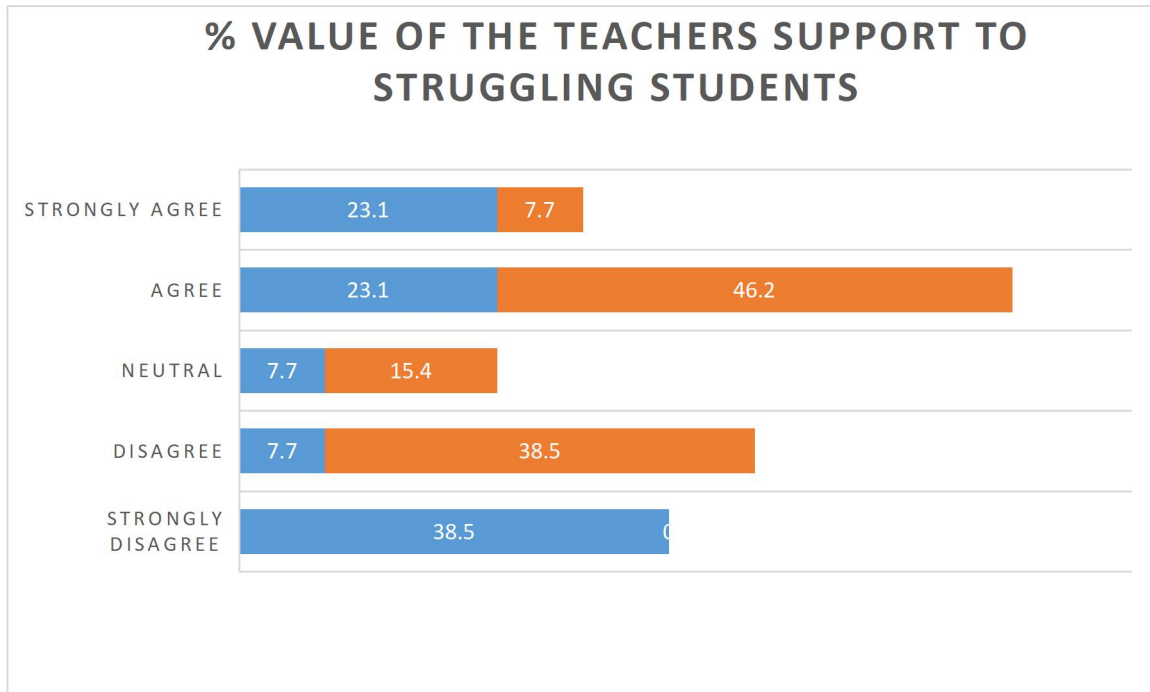
Specifically, 38.5% of students from the three public universities in Sindh agreed with the statement, "My background in a local/regional language affects my confidence in English." In comparison, an additional 15.4% strongly agreed. This indicates that over half (53.9%) of the respondents acknowledge a negative impact of their linguistic background on their English language confidence. In contrast, only 7.7% of students disagreed with the statement, suggesting that many students are aware of and potentially struggle with the linguistic transition between their native language and English in academic or social contexts (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Graph representation of Impact of Local/Regional Language Background on Students' Confidence in English: Percentage Analysis



Moreover, it was reported that teachers frequently corrected students in ways that reinforced feelings of inferiority. As a result, students participated less and lacked confidence in their academic abilities.

Figure 4.4: Graph representation of Teachers' support to Students who struggle with English



**Resistance and Identity Negotiation**

All students were asked in the online survey form whether English is associated with status, intelligence, and success. For the comment "I feel that English is associated with intelligence and power in my university," in a survey form elicited diverse student reactions, highlighting varying perceptions. A considerable number of participants linked English to status and influence, reflected by 33.3% who agreed and 25% who strongly agreed, totaling 58.3% who endorsed the statement. In contrast, 25% of respondents were neutral, indicating uncertainty or ambivalence regarding the connection between English and qualities like intelligence and power. Notably, 19.7% strongly disagreed, and no students chose "disagree" (0%), implying that while some reject this association entirely, very few hold a moderate opposing stance. The findings indicate that many students view English as a language associated with social and intellectual prestige in the university setting.

Figure 4.5: Graph representation of Students’ responses to “English is Associated with Intelligence and Power”

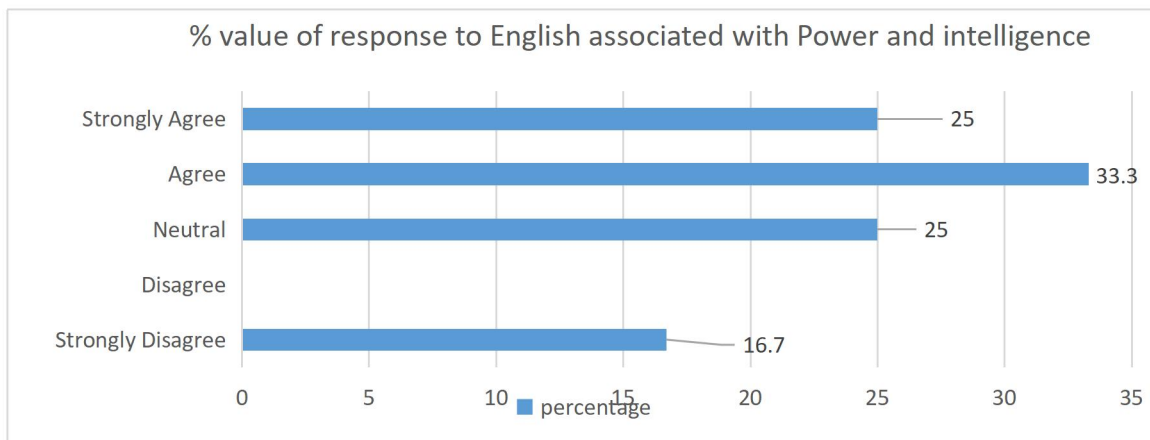
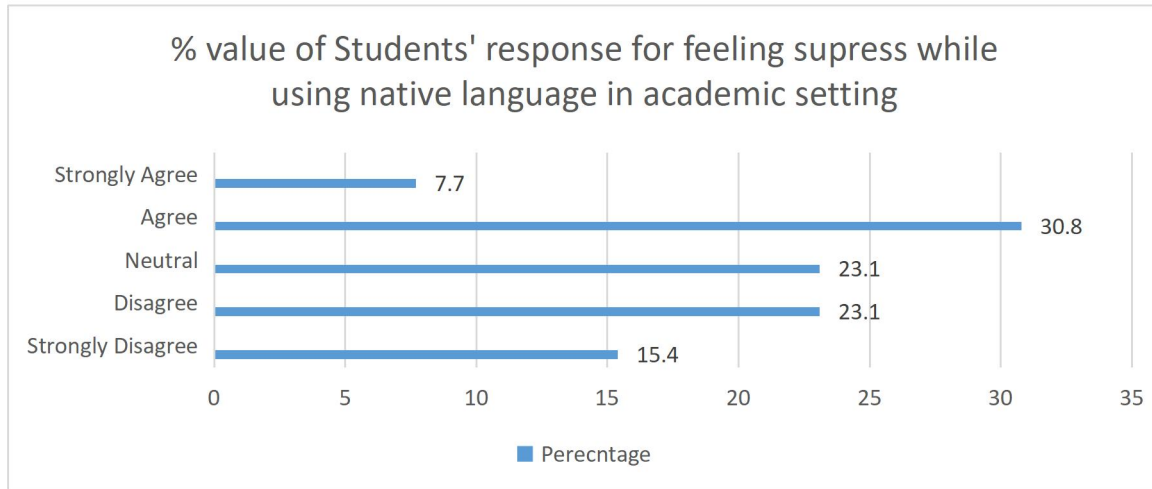
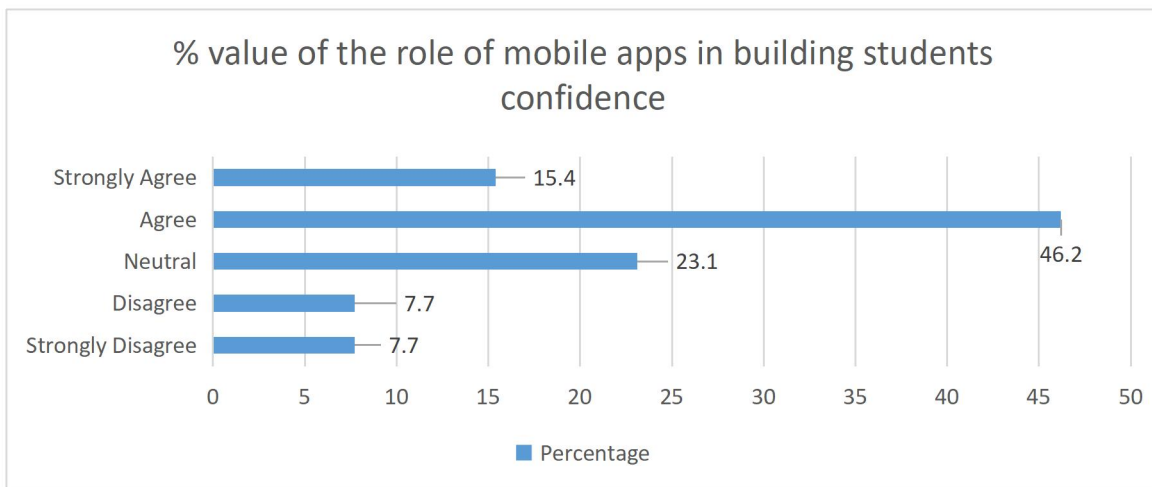


Figure 4.6: Graph Representation of responses for Suppression when using native language in an academic Setting



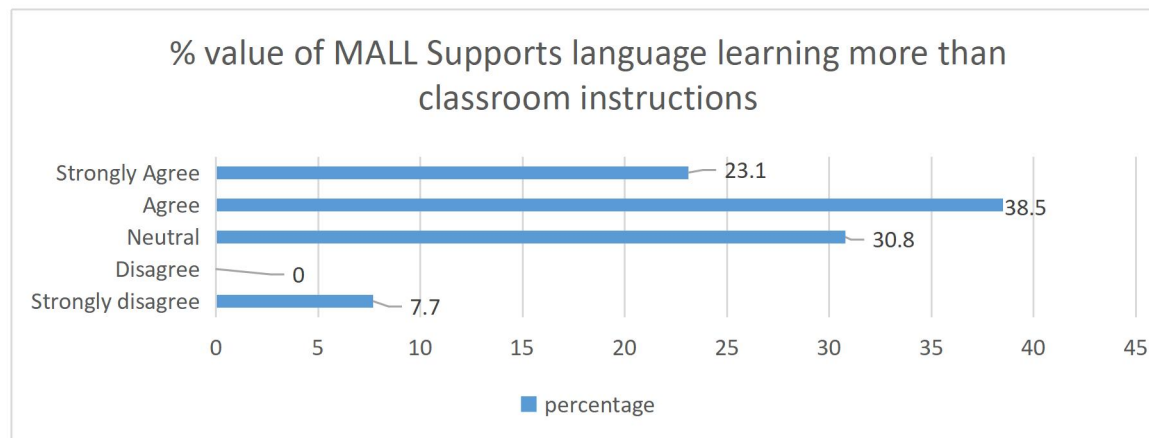
### MALL as a Counter-Hegemonic Tool

Students who used localized MALL applications, such as English-Urdu bilingual apps or culturally familiar story-based lessons, demonstrated greater motivation and self-regulation. These tools allowed learners to engage with English without abandoning their linguistic identities.



The analysis of student responses regarding learning through mobile applications reveals generally positive perceptions. Out of 60 students, 15.4% strongly agreed and 46.2% agreed that mobile learning enhances their confidence, indicating that a majority of 61.6% hold favorable views toward the effectiveness of mobile-assisted learning. Additionally, 23.1% of the students remained neutral, suggesting some uncertainty or mixed feelings about the impact of mobile apps on their learning confidence. A smaller proportion expressed negative views, with 7.7% disagreeing and another 7.7%

strongly disagreeing. Overall, the data suggests that mobile learning is well received by most students, contributing positively to their confidence, though a minority remains skeptical or unconvinced.



The graphical data representing participants' responses to the statement "*MALL supports language learning more than classroom instructions*" reveals insightful trends. Among the 60 respondents, a significant portion expressed positive views: 23.1% strongly agreed and 38.5% agreed, indicating that over 61% of participants perceive Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) as more beneficial than traditional classroom methods. Meanwhile, 30.5% remained neutral, suggesting a considerable number were either undecided or found both approaches equally effective. Notably, none of the participants disagreed, while only 7.7% strongly disagreed. This distribution suggests a generally favorable attitude toward MALL as a complementary or superior method to conventional classroom instruction in language learning.

## DISCUSSIONS

The study examines linguistic struggles, identity negotiation, and the use of digital learning tools among graduate students from three public universities in Pakistan. The findings resonate with broader concerns in Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) and Decolonial Theory, particularly in contexts where English functions as both a medium of instruction and a symbol of socio-academic power.

The analysis reveals that half of the students from public universities felt uncomfortable expressing themselves in English and associated their local linguistic background with reduced confidence. This aligns with Clarke's (2022) assertion that linguistic injustice is an epistemic issue i.e., students are not merely struggling with grammar but are being structurally silenced in knowledge-production spaces. Similar trends have been noted globally. For instance, Canagarajah (2002) highlights how students in Sri Lanka experienced similar linguistic disempowerment in English-dominant classrooms. In South Africa, Heugh (2011) emphasized that students from indigenous linguistic backgrounds often underperform when their home languages are excluded from academic contexts. These parallels reinforce that linguistic exclusion in STEM fields is a postcolonial issue requiring decolonial responses.

A significant portion of students agreed that English is associated with intelligence and social prestige. This highlights the symbolic violence of language hierarchies described by Bourdieu (1991), where students internalize the notion that legitimacy in knowledge creation and academic participation is linked to English proficiency. In Pakistan's case, this is intensified by postcolonial residues, where English



continues to act as a gatekeeper to upward mobility (Rahman, 2020). Similar dynamics are observed in other postcolonial contexts. In India, Kumaravadivelu (2012) found that students perceived English not only as a subject but also as a life skill connected to economic survival. This reinforces the necessity to critically examine how language ideologies are socially and economically constructed within engineering education globally.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

Revising language curricula to include regional literature, local idioms, and culturally relevant content is vital for fostering a more inclusive and meaningful learning experience. By updating English syllabi to align with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, educators can strengthen the connection between learners and the language. This method not only improves comprehension and engagement but also affirms students' identities, fostering pride and belonging. Integrating culturally relevant materials bridges the gap between global language standards and local realities, ultimately facilitating more effective and empowering language learning.

Enhancing student voices through participatory teaching methods is essential for creating an inclusive and vibrant learning environment. By establishing spaces where students can share their personal stories, experiences, and viewpoints, educators validate the value of diverse linguistic and cultural expressions. This strategy shifts away from traditional teacher-centered instruction, allowing learners to play an active role in their education. Incorporating various forms of language expression—such as oral narratives, creative writing, local dialects, and digital media—highlights the richness of students' communicative skills. Ultimately, valuing student voices not only empowers learners but also nurtures critical thinking, empathy, and deeper engagement with language learning.

Customizing Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) applications to integrate local language elements and align with the socio-cultural contexts of Pakistani learners is essential for improving language acquisition and learner engagement. By including culturally relevant content, such as regional expressions, everyday situations, and locally significant topics, developers can make learning more relatable and accessible. These tailored applications should represent Pakistan's linguistic diversity and address the unique needs of learners from different backgrounds. This approach not only enhances comprehension and retention but also fosters a sense of ownership and identity among users, ensuring that language learning is both effective and contextually relevant.

Educational development is crucial for cultivating inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms. By providing targeted workshops and accessible resources, institutions can equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement critical pedagogies that honor and embrace linguistic diversity. These professional development opportunities should concentrate on strategies for integrating students' home languages, addressing power dynamics in language use, and creating inclusive learning environments that reflect the multilingual reality of the classroom. Supporting educators in this manner not only boosts their confidence and effectiveness but also ensures that all students feel valued, respected, and empowered in their language learning journey.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Pakistan's linguistically diverse and politically contested landscape, the classroom becomes a crucial site for either reproducing or resisting historical inequalities. This study demonstrates that ESL learners are not passive recipients but active negotiators of meaning, identity, and power. By centering their voices and experiences, educators can challenge colonial residues in language education. Mobile-Assisted

Language Learning, when critically and culturally grounded, holds promise as a tool for linguistic emancipation and epistemic justice.

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