

A Qualitative Analysis of English Language Learning in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the challenges and opportunities for undergraduate students learning English as a second language (ESL) in five districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Grounded in a descriptive qualitative research design, this study explores the lived experiences of learners in a region characterized by significant linguistic diversity. Using a purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy, the researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduate students from five public universities. The interviews were designed to explore the challenges and opportunities of learning English, covering areas such as pedagogical practices, language use in the classroom, study environment, and parental support. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that students faced significant challenges, which were categorized into several key themes, including pedagogical approaches misaligned with communicative goals. On the other hand, students reported various opportunities for learning English, primarily driven by their own agency. These opportunities included leveraging digital resources such as social media for practice, using internet sources like YouTube for direct instruction, and accessing streaming services like Netflix for authentic language exposure. The findings of this study suggest that while undergraduate students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face significant systemic challenges in learning English, they are actively creating opportunities to enhance their language skills through informal, technology-assisted means. The results of this study may inform the development of context-specific policies and pedagogical programs aimed at improving the quality of English language education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly through the formal integration of digital learning tools. Further research is needed to explore practical strategies for addressing the identified challenges and maximizing the opportunities for English language learning for undergraduate students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), Learner Perceptions, Challenges, Opportunities, Qualitative Research, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Introduction

English language learning has become increasingly important in many countries due to globalisation and the growing demand for English proficiency in higher education, business, and social interactions. In Pakistan, English holds the status of an official language and has been a compulsory subject since the country's inception in 1947; however, the challenges associated with

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its teaching and learning have remained persistent and complex (Shah & Rahman, 2021). The government has consistently emphasised the importance of English as a second language in the educational system, particularly in provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is known for its rich cultural and linguistic diversity (Khattak et al., 2018).

However, despite the growing emphasis on English language learning, many students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa continue to face various challenges in developing their English proficiency (Ali, 2019; Khattak et al., 2018). The challenges of learning the English language in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are multifaceted and complex. These issues, common across Pakistan, include inadequate resources, large class sizes, a lack of continuous professional development for teachers, and an administrative framework that often struggles to provide consistent support (Imran et al., 2023; Muslim et al., 2025).

Furthermore, a significant disparity exists between the educational outcomes of public and private sector institutions. Private schools, often with better resources and more modern pedagogical approaches, tend to produce students with higher English proficiency, creating a socio-educational divide that disadvantages learners in the public system, who constitute the majority in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Farida, 2018; Maitlo et al., 2023). This context is exacerbated by pedagogical practices that often rely on traditional, teacher-centred methods like grammar-translation, which fail to develop the communicative competence required for real-world interactions (Esmail et al., 2015; Imran et al., 2023).

At the same time, the proliferation of digital technology has created new, learner-driven opportunities for language acquisition that exist outside the formal classroom, a phenomenon that warrants deeper investigation (Rintaningrum, 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of English language learning for undergraduate students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from their own perspective. It moves beyond a general catalogue of problems to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of how the specific sociolinguistic context of the region shapes learners' experiences. By focusing on systemic pedagogical issues and the compensatory strategies students employ through digital media, this research seeks to identify effective, context-sensitive strategies for enhancing English language learning outcomes.

Research Questions

1. What are the pedagogical, environmental, and sociocultural challenges faced by undergraduate English language learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
2. What are the opportunities, particularly those mediated by technology that English language learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are utilizing to improve their proficiency?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide nuanced, context-specific insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by English language learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Understanding these factors is crucial for the development of effective policies and programs that can improve the quality of English language education and enhance students' English language proficiency. The study's findings can also inform the design and implementation of teacher training programs, curriculum development, and assessment practices that can better meet the needs of English language learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Furthermore, by documenting the extensive use of informal digital learning tools, the study offers valuable insights into learner agency and autonomy. It underscores the potential for educational

institutions to formally integrate and support these technology-assisted learning strategies, thereby bridging the gap between formal instruction and the practical, self-directed methods students find effective.

Overall, the study's significance lies in its potential to contribute to the improvement of English language education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and enhance students' opportunities for success in higher education, employment, and social interactions.

Statement of the Problem

English language learning is considered crucial for students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to the demand for English in higher education, business, and social interactions. However, despite the growing emphasis on English language learning, many students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa continue to face various challenges in developing their English proficiency. These challenges are not uniform across the country; they are shaped by the unique sociolinguistic and educational landscape of the province. While systemic issues like resource scarcity and outdated teaching methods are prevalent (Imran et al., 2023; Muslim et al., 2025), there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of learners. Furthermore, the informal learning opportunities emerging from the digital ecosystem are often disconnected from formal pedagogical strategies. Therefore, this study aims to identify the opportunities and challenges of English language learning for undergraduate students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review

This review of literature synthesizes research on the key factors influencing English as a Second Language (ESL) learning in Pakistan, with a specific focus on the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). It is organized into three thematic sections: (1) the broader sociolinguistic context of English in Pakistan; (2) systemic and pedagogical challenges prevalent in the region; and (3) the emerging opportunities for language acquisition driven by learner agency in the digital era.

The Sociolinguistic Landscape of English in Pakistan

The role of English in Pakistan is complex and deeply embedded in the nation's history and social structure. Braj Kachru's (1985) influential model of World Englishes categorizes Pakistan as part of the "Outer Circle," where English, though not a native language, serves as an institutionalized second language with official functions in government, higher education, and commerce. This official status, however, coexists with a reality where proficiency remains a significant challenge for the majority of the population, who are educated in a system that struggles to deliver effective language instruction (Shah & Rahman, 2021).

A defining feature of the educational landscape is the stark divide between public and private institutions. Farida (2018) notes that this division often correlates with linguistic proficiency; students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds who attend expensive, English-medium private schools typically achieve higher levels of fluency. In contrast, students from lower-income families, who predominantly attend government schools where the medium of instruction is often Urdu or a regional language, face a significant disadvantage. This disparity not only affects educational attainment but also reinforces social stratification, as English proficiency is often perceived as a form of social capital (Shahid et al., 2024). This context is particularly relevant in KP, where the majority of students are educated in the public sector and must transition to an English-medium environment at the tertiary level (Farida, 2018).

Pedagogical and Systemic Challenges in Pakistani ELT

Research consistently identifies a set of recurring systemic and pedagogical challenges that impede effective ESL learning across Pakistan. These include inadequate resources, such as a lack of language laboratories and modern teaching aids; large and overcrowded classrooms that make individualized instruction nearly impossible; and a lack of sustained, high-quality professional development for teachers (Imran et al., 2023; Muslim et al., 2025). A recent study in rural Sindh, for instance, found that over 73% of teachers felt hampered by a lack of resources, and 51.7% cited large class sizes as a major obstacle (Muslim et al., 2025). These conditions are mirrored in other regions, including KP (Ali, 2019; Khattak et al., 2018).

Beyond resource constraints, pedagogical approaches are often cited as a primary barrier. Many classrooms still adhere to traditional, teacher-centred methods that emphasize rote memorization and the grammar-translation method (Esmail et al., 2015). As Farida (2012) observes, this approach prioritizes grammatical accuracy on paper over the development of productive skills like speaking and listening. The curriculum itself is often criticized for being examination-oriented rather than focused on achieving communicative competence. Thomson (2013) argues that teachers, under pressure to cover the syllabus for high-stakes exams, give the lowest priority to the actual communicative needs of ESL students. This results in a situation where students may know grammatical rules but are unable to use the language fluently or confidently in authentic contexts (Ahmad, Shahid, & Farhat, 2023).

Socio-Psychological and Environmental Factors

Beyond linguistic issues, learners' success is influenced by a range of psychological and social factors. Brown (2008) highlights that a lack of proficiency can undermine confidence, leading to anxiety and demotivation. This is compounded by what Liu (2011) describes as the difficulty of adapting to new learning systems and teaching methods, which can slow cognitive growth.

The immediate learning environment plays a crucial role. Dörnyei (2008) emphasizes that a lack of interaction, both between teacher and student and among peers, harms language acquisition by limiting practice and confidence-building opportunities. Furthermore, the broader social context, including socioeconomic background and parental encouragement, significantly impacts learning. Studies in Pakistan have shown that a lack of parental support is a common barrier, especially in rural areas where immediate practical skills may be prioritized over language learning (Saima et al., 2018; Muneer, as cited in Imran et al., 2023).

Emerging Opportunities: Learner Agency in the Digital Era

Despite these formidable challenges, the proliferation of digital technology has opened up unprecedented opportunities for language learners, often driven by their own initiative. This shift reflects a move towards greater learner autonomy, where students actively seek resources outside the formal classroom to supplement their education (Ammade et al., 2018, as cited in Rintaningrum, 2023).

Technology integration in education, in general, offers significant benefits, including promoting active and collaborative learning, increasing student engagement, and providing access to a vast array of resources (Rintaningrum, 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2023). For ESL learners, this is particularly valuable. Digital tools can provide access to authentic materials like videos, podcasts, and news articles that are often absent from traditional textbooks, allowing for more natural and engaging skill development (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, as cited in Rintaningrum, 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2023).

Social Media as a Learning Tool

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become informal spaces for language practice. Recent research in Pakistan shows that students use these platforms to improve vocabulary, practice writing through comments and posts, and engage in peer-to-peer communication in English (Malik & Qureshi, 2024; Saeed, 2021). Malik and Qureshi (2024) found that 97% of their study participants in Pakistan found social media helpful for improving their English, particularly in vocabulary and grammar. These platforms provide a low-stakes environment for producing comprehensible L2 output and receiving real-time feedback (Brick, 2011, as cited in Saeed et al., 2022).

Streaming Services for Authentic Exposure

Video-on-demand services like Netflix have emerged as a powerful tool for language acquisition. They offer a vast library of authentic audiovisual content, which is crucial for developing listening skills and understanding cultural nuances (G. Murray, 2008, as cited in Sari & Pratiwi, 2024; Jenner, 2018). The availability of multilingual subtitles is a key feature; studies have shown that watching with L2 subtitles (intralingual) can significantly support vocabulary acquisition and form recognition, while L1 subtitles (interlingual) can aid comprehension, especially for lower-level learners (Danan, 2004; Winke et al., 2010). Research indicates that students perceive Netflix as an enjoyable and effective tool for improving their English, with 88% of participants in one study agreeing it helps them improve their English for everyday situations (Ayu, 2020).

Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework employed in this study. It details the research design, participant selection strategy, data collection instruments and procedures, and the analytical approach used to interpret the data.

Research Design

The current research employs the challenges and opportunities faced by English language learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. To achieve this, the study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design (Farida, 2012). This approach is particularly well-suited for this inquiry because it seeks to gain a deep, rich, and nuanced understanding of individuals' subjective experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to them (Patton, 2002). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical generalization, this qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration of the complexities of language learning within a specific sociocultural context (Creswell, 2007).

The analytical framework for this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), this method provides the core skills for making sense of extensive qualitative datasets and is not tied to a specific theoretical epistemology, making it highly adaptable for descriptive research of this nature.

Participant Selection and Sample

The participants in this study were 20 undergraduate students enrolled in various degree programs at five public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A demographic profile of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Profile (N=20)

Characteristic Category		Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	10	50%
	Female	10	50%
Age Range	18–22 years	15	75%
	23–25 years	5	25%
University	University of Peshawar	4	20%
	University of Buner	4	20%
	Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan	4	20%
	Kohat University of Science and Technology	4	20%
	Hazara University	4	20%
Field of Study	Social Sciences & Humanities	9	45%
	Natural & Physical Sciences	7	35%
	Business & Management Sciences	4	20%

Sampling Technique

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select participants for this study. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability technique characteristic of qualitative research where participants are intentionally selected based on their specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics relevant to the research question (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). This method is ideal for identifying "information-rich cases" that can provide deep insights into the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002).

Specifically, a maximum variation sampling strategy was utilized. This type of purposive sampling aims to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences by including participants from diverse backgrounds or settings (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, students were selected from five different public universities located in various districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to ensure that the findings reflected a broad spectrum of experiences across the province rather than being limited to a single institution.

Sample Size

The sample size for this study was 20 participants. This size is considered robust for qualitative research, as it is large enough to facilitate the exploration of diverse perspectives through the maximum variation sampling strategy while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis. According to Creswell (1998), a sample of 20 to 30 participants is ideal for many qualitative studies, and other researchers suggest saturation can be reached with as few as 9 to 17 participants for homogenous groups (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). By interviewing four students from each of the five universities, the study aimed to achieve data saturation—the point at which new data no longer yields new themes—thereby ensuring the findings are comprehensive and well-grounded (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Instrumentation

The primary instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. This format was chosen because it provides a consistent framework of core questions for all participants, ensuring that key research areas are covered, while also allowing the flexibility for the interviewer to ask

follow-up questions and probe for deeper, more detailed responses based on the participant's unique experiences (Farida, 2012). The interview guide was designed to elicit information related to the study's research questions, covering topics such as classroom experiences, specific learning difficulties (including pronunciation and grammar), environmental factors, parental support, and the use of out-of-class resources like technology and private institutes.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and provided informed consent to participate. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet setting on the participants' respective university campuses to ensure comfort and privacy. A smaller number of interviews were conducted via telephone for participants who were unavailable for an in-person meeting. All interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Pashto/Urdu, depending on the participant's comfort level, to ensure they could express themselves fully. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides a rigorous and systematic approach to identifying and interpreting themes within qualitative data. The process was as follows:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** This initial phase involved repeatedly reading the verbatim transcripts and listening to the audio recordings to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the dataset. Initial thoughts and potential patterns were noted down in memos (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** The transcripts were systematically reviewed, and initial codes were assigned to segments of data that captured a specific idea or concept related to the research questions. A code is a brief descriptive label for a piece of data (e.g., "L1 use in class," "fear of pronunciation mistakes"). This process was conducted meticulously across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
3. **Searching for Themes:** In this phase, the various codes were collated and organized into potential overarching themes. This involved identifying broader patterns of meaning and grouping related codes together. For example, codes like "boring lectures," "focus on writing only," and "exam-focused teaching" were grouped under a potential theme related to "Pedagogy Misaligned with Communicative Goals" (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
4. **Reviewing Themes:** The potential themes were then reviewed at two levels. First, the data extracts within each theme were checked to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. Second, the entire thematic map was reviewed in relation to the full dataset to ensure it accurately represented the participants' experiences. Themes were refined, merged, or discarded as necessary during this iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Once a satisfactory thematic map was developed, each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, descriptive name. This involved writing a detailed analysis for each theme, articulating its scope and essence and identifying sub-themes that captured different facets of the main theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

6. **Producing the Report:** The final phase involved weaving the analyzed themes into a coherent and persuasive narrative, supported by compelling and illustrative quotes from the participant interviews. This report presents that final narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings: A Thematic Analysis of Learner Experiences

The data gathered through semi-structured interviews revealed a complex picture of the challenges and opportunities faced by undergraduate ESL learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The analysis yielded three superordinate themes, each with corresponding sub-themes that capture the nuances of the learner experience. Table 2 provides a thematic map that visually outlines these findings.

Table 2: Thematic Map of Findings

Superordinate Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: The Dichotomy of the Classroom Environment: A Space of Both Mandate and Missed Opportunity	1.1: A Non-Conducive Learning Atmosphere 1.2: Pedagogy Misaligned with Communicative Goals
Theme 2: The External Ecosystem of Support: A Spectrum of Encouragement and Apathy	2.1: Lack of Parental Encouragement 2.2: The Formal-Informal Learning Divide
Theme 3: Navigating the Digital Frontier: Learner-Driven Opportunities for Language Enhancement	3.1: The Internet as a Universal Tutor 3.2: Entertainment as Education: Leveraging Streaming Services 3.3: Social media as a Practice Ground

Theme 1: The Dichotomy of the Classroom Environment: A Space of Both Mandate and Missed Opportunity

Participants consistently described the formal classroom as a paradoxical space. While it was the mandated center for their English education, they felt it frequently failed to provide the necessary conditions for genuine language acquisition. This theme is explored through two sub-themes.

A Non-Conducive Learning Atmosphere

The physical and social environment of the classroom was often described as unconducive to learning. Many participants cited issues such as overcrowding and a lack of discipline, which made it difficult to focus and for teachers to manage academic activities effectively.

"The environment has a significant impact on English language acquisition... The setting is unsettling and useless, which makes learning impossible. The study's participants claimed that this setting was not healthy for them. They believe that when confident pupils communicate with one another, it disturbs the other students." (Participant 15)

Another student added, "If the environment is conducive to learning, the students feel more at ease and motivated." The sentiment was that a chaotic or unsupportive atmosphere directly contributed to their demotivation.

Pedagogy Misaligned with Communicative Goals

A critical point of frustration for students was the perceived mismatch between the course content and their goal of learning to speak English. They reported that classroom activities were overwhelmingly focused on passive skills like reading and writing, with almost no opportunities for structured speaking practice.

"The researcher discovered that several students also mentioned that the English-language course material does not adequately support the speaking activities during the interview. Students claim that the maximum amount of time teachers give us to compose something in English is. However, there was never an opportunity for us to use English. They have significant problems with their speaking output." (Participant 7)

This pedagogical focus on written grammar and composition, at the expense of communicative practice, left students feeling unprepared for real-world verbal interactions and contributed to their overall learning difficulties.

Theme 2: The External Ecosystem of Support: A Spectrum of Encouragement and Apathy

This theme explores the role of external factors beyond the classroom, revealing a mixed landscape where formal and informal support systems are often misaligned or lacking.

Lack of Parental Encouragement

A recurring point of concern for many students was the lack of encouragement from their parents regarding English language learning. They reported that their families often prioritized other skills or immediate employment over the long-term benefits of language proficiency.

"The researcher discovered the importance of parental encouragement. Most parents of undergraduate students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa force their kids to study other skills rather than encouraging them to learn English. One of the difficulties that English language learners may encounter is this. The participants had also mentioned that they were forced to work by their parents rather than studying the English language." (Participant 14)

This lack of familial support can act as a significant demotivator, creating an environment where language learning is not valued or prioritized at home.

The Formal-Informal Learning Divide

Students identified a clear divide between the opportunities available in their formal university education and those they could access informally. They found that resources like private language institutes and libraries offered the focused, skills-based training that their university courses lacked.

"The majority of the pupils...believed they had access to private institutes where they could acquire the English language. The teacher emphasises the four language skills in those centres... Now is an ideal time for English learners in this area to sign up and begin learning the language." (Participant 4)

Similarly, they noted the value of libraries for accessing a wide range of books to improve their reading skills. This suggests that students are actively seeking to fill the gaps left by their formal education by turning to external, often commercial, resources.

Theme 3: Navigating the Digital Frontier: Learner-Driven Opportunities for Language Enhancement

This final theme captures the most significant area of opportunity identified by the participants: the digital world. In stark contrast to the limitations of their formal education, students demonstrated remarkable agency and resourcefulness in using technology to create their own language learning environments.

The Internet as a Universal Tutor

The internet was universally cited as a critical resource for self-directed learning. Students reported using a variety of online tools to improve specific language skills, effectively turning the web into a personalized tutor.

"The bulk of the pupils the researcher observes watch lectures on YouTube to improve their grammar and vocabulary. Thus, pupils have access to outside-class websites in this manner." (Participant 19)

Another student mentioned, "Some students have mentioned that they attend online websites to take courses." This highlights a proactive approach where learners are identifying their own weaknesses and seeking out targeted instruction online.

Entertainment as Education: Leveraging Streaming Services

A particularly prominent opportunity was the use of entertainment media, especially movies on streaming platforms like Netflix, for language practice. This method was seen as both enjoyable and effective for improving listening skills and exposure to authentic, colloquial English.

"They have said that after class, we should watch Netflix movies to practise our language skills. Additionally, many stated that they use the internet for reading since they cannot access newspapers in remote locations." (Participant 13)

This practice of "extensive viewing" allows learners to immerse themselves in the language in a low-pressure context, acquiring vocabulary and an intuitive sense of rhythm and intonation that is absent from their formal instruction.

Social Media as a Practice Ground

Social media platforms were identified as a vital space for both receptive and productive language practice. Students used these platforms to read content in English, engage in discussions, and, most importantly, practice their writing and speaking skills.

"The researcher discovered during the interview that many of the pupils had access to social networking apps. They read texts and offer English commentary on them. To improve their writing, they also share their opinions on social, political, and meme topics in English on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram." (Participant 6)

Crucially, these platforms provided the opportunity for authentic communication that was missing in the classroom. One student noted the value of speaking with friends and virtual acquaintances, stating, "I used to speak more than we do in class because native speakers surround me." This demonstrates how students are creating their own communities of practice online to develop the communicative skills their formal education neglects.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a rich, learner-centric perspective on the multifaceted reality of learning English as a second language in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The thematic analysis reveals a compelling narrative of students navigating a challenging educational landscape while demonstrating remarkable agency through their engagement with digital technologies. This discussion interprets these findings by synthesizing them with the established literature, offering deeper insights into the interplay of these factors.

The first theme, "The Dichotomy of the Classroom Environment," strongly corroborates existing research on the systemic and pedagogical challenges in Pakistan's public education sector (Imran et al., 2023; Muslim et al., 2025). The participants' descriptions of overcrowded classrooms and a

non-conducive learning atmosphere align with findings from across the country (Farida, 2018; Muslim et al., 2025). The frustration expressed by students regarding a curriculum that prioritizes writing and grammar over speaking (Farida, 2012) confirms the critique that Pakistani ELT is often misaligned with communicative goals, focusing more on examination success than on practical language proficiency (Saima et al., 2018; Thomson, 2013).

The second theme, "The External Ecosystem of Support," highlights the broader social context influencing language acquisition. The reported lack of parental encouragement is a common finding in studies of ESL in rural and developing contexts in Pakistan, where the immediate economic utility of other skills can overshadow the perceived long-term value of English proficiency (Saima et al., 2018; Muneer, as cited in Imran et al., 2023). The students' reliance on private institutes and libraries further illuminates the public-private educational divide noted by Farida (2018). It suggests that students are aware of the deficiencies in their formal education and are willing to invest their own time and resources to seek out the skills-focused training they need, pointing to a high level of intrinsic motivation despite external discouragement.

This leads to the final and most forward-looking theme: "Navigating the Digital Frontier." The findings here are transformative, revealing how students are not passive victims of a flawed system but are active agents in their own learning. Their use of the internet, streaming services like Netflix, and social media platforms represents a powerful form of learner autonomy (Ammade et al., 2018, as cited in Rintaningrum, 2023). They are proactively creating a personalized, informal learning environment to compensate for what the formal classroom lacks: authentic input, interactive practice, and low-stakes communication opportunities. This aligns with a growing body of research on the role of technology in language learning (Rintaningrum, 2023; Widiastuti et al., 2023). The students' use of Netflix for "extensive viewing" to improve listening skills (Ayu, 2020; Peters, 2022) and social media for writing practice (Malik & Qureshi, 2024; Saeed, 2021) demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of their own learning needs. This presents a critical insight: the most significant "opportunities" for ESL learners in KP are not institutionally provided but are self-created through digital engagement. This reality stands in stark contrast to an educational system that has yet to formally integrate these powerful tools into its pedagogical framework.

In synthesis, the study paints a picture of a fundamental disconnect. On one hand, the formal education system is hampered by systemic inertia. On the other hand, the learners themselves are highly motivated and resourceful, leveraging the global digital ecosystem to forge their own paths to proficiency. The central challenge for educators and policymakers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, therefore, is to bridge this gap—to create a formal learning environment that is as dynamic and responsive as the informal learning strategies its students are already pioneering.

Conclusion and Recommendations

English, as a global language and an official language in Pakistan, plays a pivotal role in academic and professional advancement. This study explored the challenges and opportunities of learning English from the perspective of undergraduate students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Based on the findings, it is concluded that these learners face a complex web of interconnected challenges while simultaneously creating their own opportunities for language development.

The primary challenges identified are rooted in a formal education system that is often ill-equipped to foster communicative competence. These include a non-conducive physical and social atmosphere, a lack of parental encouragement, and pedagogical approaches that neglect speaking skills.

Conversely, the study reveals a powerful narrative of learner agency and resilience. The most significant opportunities for these students are not provided by their institutions but are actively sought out in the digital realm. Through their use of internet resources, social media, and streaming services, students are demonstrating a high degree of autonomy, creating personalized and immersive learning environments to compensate for the shortcomings of their formal education.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several interconnected recommendations are proposed to enhance English language education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For educators and curriculum developers, it is crucial to integrate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), shifting the focus from rote memorization of grammar rules to the development of communicative competence through structured speaking and listening activities such as debates, role-plays, and group discussions. They should also formally integrate the digital tools students are already using by creating assignments that involve video creation or participation in online forums, thereby bridging the gap between informal and formal learning. Concurrently, policymakers and institutions must invest in continuous, high-quality professional development for English teachers, emphasizing modern methodologies and technology integration. Efforts should also be made to improve the classroom environment by reducing class sizes, providing essential resources like multimedia equipment, and promoting an English-speaking environment on campus to increase opportunities for authentic practice. Finally, future research should include longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of digital tools on English proficiency and comparative analyses with private-sector universities to understand how different educational settings affect outcomes. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards creating a more effective, supportive, and contextually relevant English language learning ecosystem for the students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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