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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Gender, Language Choice, and Identity in Multilingual University Classrooms: A Mixed-Methods Study of BS English Students in Pakistan

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Abstract: The choice of language has an impact on communication and participation among multilingual students in classroom settings. Nevertheless, little is known about the interconnectedness of language, gender, and identity in the context of Pakistani universities. This paper studies how the students of the BS English programme at the University of Science and Technology in Bannu employ their native Pashto, national Urdu, and international English in the classroom, as well as how they perceive their attitudes towards language use and identity. A cross-sectional mixed-methods strategy was applied. The study examined 20 completed structured questionnaires (10 from males and 10 from females). Written responses of 20 different students (10 males and 10 females) enabled the collection of qualitative findings. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and the qualitative responses were examined thematically. The results revealed that English was used most often in presentations and interactions with the teachers. The use of Urdu and Pashto was crucial in peers' conversations and informal communication. English was linked to the concept of professional identity, while the use of Pashto was connected to cultural identity. A few gender-based differences were observed, but the explanation of students was inconsistent and at times even contradictory. The expectations in classrooms, self-confidence, and communication requirements contributed more to the understanding of the issue than mere knowledge that men and women use different languages. The research emphasizes the significance of taking into consideration multilingual resources belonging to students along with academic English skills. The results can be used for making recommendations regarding inclusive participation in Pakistani higher education.

Keywords: Multilingual Classrooms, Language Choice, Code-Switching, Gender, Identity, Pashto, Pakistani Higher Education

Introduction

In the multilingual university classroom, the language chosen by the student changes according to the purpose of the talk. In terms of a formal presentation, English is chosen; while for giving a difficult explanation, Urdu is selected; and for dealing with classmates, Pashto is preferred. These choices are not merely about language proficiency. The students' decisions also reflect their confidence as well as their relations with others, as well as their understanding of what is appropriate in the academic milieu.

Studies regarding multilingual education have revealed that language switching facilitates learning, while also implying social connotations. According to Kartika-Ningsih and Rose (2018), language switching during classes has different pedagogical significance based on the context of language exchange. In the same vein, Cummins (2000) argues that multilingual classrooms are places for negotiating identities, where interaction between students and teachers is influenced by the broader context of language relations, status,

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and power. Thus, these approaches help to understand that it would be pertinent to analyze the choice of languages made by students not only from the standpoint of language of choice but also from the perspective of the meaning attributed to a certain language choice.

Pakistan is a particularly relevant context for this study as different languages such as English, Urdu, and regional languages exist in higher education, but with different implications for different places. English is closely related to academic education and professional jobs, while Urdu is used as a common tool among people who speak different languages. After all, regional languages (such as Pashto) have significance for everyday activities of individuals that involve language use. Therefore, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, students are likely to switch between these languages when fulfilling requirements of the universities and personal relations. Research by Khan and Muysken (2014) shows that there is a systematic introduction of English elements in Pashto, but it is not the only thing that can explain why students choose those languages in the respective situations.

In recent times, the relationship between language choice and identity has gained prominence in research in Pakistani universities. Shah et al. (2020), investigating code-switching among lecturers and students at a Pakistani university, point out that the practice of multilingualism may help in shaping hybrid identities and that Pashto and English do not have to be considered as mutually exclusive identities. Instead, both languages may be used by an individual in ways to frame oneself within different local and academic contexts. Additionally, the studies conducted in other countries highlight a similar association between language choice and the construction of identity and one's place in society in terms of belonging (Ramsay-Brijball, 2004).

The presence of gender plays a crucial role in the relationship in question. Farida et al. (2018) found through their research with multilingual educated women who speak Sindhi that several of these participants prefer to use English in circumstances where the construction of gender identity takes place. Another study conducted by Fatima et al. (2025) focused on the pedagogical and identity-related motives for the use of code-switching by university students in Pakistan while focusing specifically on the role of gender within the variable of language. The outcome is that it was previously established that the use of specific languages may be determined by people's self-perception and perception of others.

As a result of this, previous studies contain useful insights regarding the multilingual communication process on linguistic, educational, and social levels. However, one particular question still arises: how students' language practices correlate with their identities and attitudes in different contexts of classroom situations and whether there exists any difference depending on gender. Linguistic structure studies dealing either with the language mainly or the students belonging to particular gender groups do provide the necessary information but of different kinds. The researchers place less emphasis on the issue of students' perception of language use and identity in relation to their understanding of the terms connected with confidence level or expectations in the classroom environment.

The present study examines the mentioned issues in BS English students of the University of Science and Technology, Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It investigates how much Pashto, Urdu, and English are utilized in their presentations, responses to teachers, peer discussions, and informal conversations, among other activities. It probes into the attitudes of students concerning code-switching and how strongly the students associate each of the languages with different aspects of their identity, such as academic, cultural, professional, or gender identity. It employs a mixed-methods approach in that it collates results of closed-ended questionnaires surveying 20 students (10 male and 10 female) and open-ended questionnaires focusing on another group of 20 students (10 male and 10 female).

Research Questions

The study attempts to address the two research questions:

RQ1: How do BS English students at the University of Science and Technology Bannu report using Pashto,

Urdu, and English across classroom contexts, and what attitudes and identity associations do they attach to these languages?

RQ2: How do reported language practices, attitudes, and identity associations differ between male and female students, and how do students explain these patterns in relation to classroom expectations, confidence, and gender?

In addressing these questions, the research intends to provide a specific understanding of how multilingual individuals select languages at Pakistani universities. The study's highlight is how it incorporates evidence about the way individuals speak languages and view their identities, as well as what students think about their education. Rather than making the assumption that certain languages and styles of speech belong to a specific gender, the research makes an inquiry into how the individuals perceive these relations based on their own experience. The data is obtained from the questionnaires; therefore, the conclusions are about the perceptions and practices and not directly about the interactions and effects.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Multilingual Language Choice and Identity

Language choice indicates the languages that an individual possesses; in the multilingual context, people use the different available resources to reach their communicative goals, establish relationships, and meet social norms. Language choices could symbolize different aspects of identity. For example, according to the poststructuralist approach of Ramsay-Brijball (2004), identity can be seen as something negotiable since code-switching might take part in the establishment of social status. In the same vein, Leontovich (2017) explains that identity is a very complicated and layered mechanism, which develops via communication and social interactions. Both authors indicate that the importance of language choice is in the meaning that an individual attaches to this choice rather than the languages used.

Language classrooms are quite clear in showing these connections. According to Cummins (2000), multilingual classrooms are crucial for the process of identity formation because certain cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be recognized or marginalized in such contexts. Moreover, Spotti (2011) shows that educational policies contribute to the formation of the identity of multilingual learners. Hence, the research in the area demonstrates that classroom language preferences cannot be understood without regard to the concept of identity.

Code-Switching and Classroom Communication

The studies conducted on multilingual classroom discourse have shown consistently that the process of switching languages has significant educational benefits. Kartika-Ningsih and Rose (2018) have created an analytical framework that shows how language change can be beneficial for various stages of the process of teaching and studying. This work shows that multilingual communication always follows the pattern and aim of classroom interaction. The study by Ziegler et al. (2012) confirmed this finding when analyzing the cases of students' use of multilingual communication.

Different functions of code-switching in education have been investigated in the literature. The study conducted by Shartiely (2016) in Tanzania revealed that code-switching facilitated the proper engagement of students with their professors. Another study conducted by Bonyadi et al. (2021) provided information about classroom management and relationships of teachers with students as the two purposes of language switching practice. The research of Nawaz et al. (2023) in Pakistan determined the relation between code-switching and emotional support.

It can be stated that multilingualism in education somehow promotes successful knowledge transfer and anxiety management in person. Nonetheless, the functions of language switching completely depend on the communication situation. Different activities have different contexts.

Pashto, Urdu, and English in Pakistani Higher Education

In Pakistan, the use of multiple languages is prevalent in university communications among students, including English, Urdu, and local languages. The importance of different languages is influenced by different expectations in education, language backgrounds, and how local people behave with each other. Thus, Pashto has a key role in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa because it can be used for daily conversation, while Urdu and English are used for more complex interactions both in academic and social environments.

This topic was covered in detail by Khan and Muysken (2014), who studied the influence of some words in the English language on the Pashto speech of people, demonstrating that Pashto-English code-mixing has some predictable language framework. This study helps people understand the process of language contact; however, the focus of the authors is grammar.

In a study that went beyond just the linguistic aspect, Shah et al. (2020) explored code-switching used by both students and faculty in Pakistani universities. Using recorded conversations and interviews, they discovered that regularly mixing Pashto and English indicated hybrid identity orientation. In their study, the authors show how the speakers combine local linguistic resources with academic ones in their speech instead of treating them as different entities.

More recently, Hajira and Khan (2026) researched code-switching and code-mixing among BS English students in Buner. In their qualitative study, the researchers linked the phenomenon to multilingualism, which affects understanding, involvement in class, academic aspirations, and belongingness. Although the study is relevant to this research as it discusses similar educational and regional contexts, its use of the qualitative method makes it different.

Gender, Code-Switching, and Social Expectations

The issue of how gender influences language selection is gaining popularity among academic researchers. In the past, research dealt with the question of differences in the use of language by different genders, but modern investigations highlight the idea that meanings associated with each gender are formed in specific contexts. Stokoe's (2005) research emphasizes the need to study the situation in which gender categories become relevant when communicating and not conclude that the differences between male and female speakers have always existed.

Studies on multilingual communication illustrated the idea that each language choice can be connected to a specific gender meaning. García-Sánchez (2010), who studied Moroccan girls who migrated to Spain, showed that code-switching helped these girls form their gender identities during acting games. In South Asia, Farida et al. (2018) studied informal communication among multilingual women and discovered that English was often connected with the expression of gender identity. Ahmed et al. (2015) investigated the ways in which gender-related code-mixing among Pakistani students is used through text messages.

Though these pieces of research highlight the importance of gender in multilingualism, they are conducted in contexts that differ altogether from formal educational institutions. The observations made during play, in casual conversations, or during exchanges taking place on the internet cannot be construed as indicators of communication between BS English students and their teachers or classmates. According to Fatima et al. (2025), the research carried out among Pakistani college students makes a more appropriate comparison. The association between the needs connected with studies and the reasons motivating people to engage in code-switching has been demonstrated. Besides, the authors found that the participants reported variations concerning gender- influenced reasons for code-switching.

Language Attitudes and Identity Associations

The attitudes toward languages provide an additional understanding regarding the phenomenon of multilinguality. It is possible that students appreciate a language because it allows them to express themselves

well, pursue their educational goals successfully, or establish communication with specific communities. Generally, these evaluations do influence students' choices concerning language as well as students' attitudes toward language.

According to Shah et al. (2020), multilingualism enables different identity orientations within higher education in Pakistan. Sultana (2018) shows the example of women in Bangladesh in terms of the way in which multilingual practices connect to gender identity. Rahman et al. (2025) examine the issue of code mixing from the point of view of its influence on communication in Indonesian social media.

According to the current studies, the meanings attributed to languages may vary based on the context in which the languages are used. For instance, for some students, English may refer to something related to education or jobs, while for some others, Urdu or Pashto may imply cultural ties and tradition or relationships between people. However, the role of identity in this context has not been empirically tested.

Moreover, it is essential to distinguish different aspects of identity. Academic identity is related to the way students perceive themselves from the perspective of being consumers of education products; professional identity is connected to future careers; cultural identity is defined by heritage and cultural background; while gender identity is about how students see their gender self.

Research Gap and Contribution

The research examined verifies the claim that speaking in a multilingual manner fulfills educational, social, and identity functions. It has been shown that the key characteristics of mixing Pashto and English were determined (Khan & Muysken, 2014), code-switching is associated with hybrid identity among Pakistani students (Shah et al., 2020), and students' gender affects the reasons they switch languages (Fatima et al., 2025). More recent studies in District Buner reveal links between the multilingual practices in classrooms and academic engagement (Hajira & Khan, 2026).

These contributions serve as a basis for the current study. However, it also means that additional research concerning the way students use Pashto, Urdu, and English in the classrooms, the way they value these languages, and the way they associate them with various aspects of their identity is still needed. The study of gender patterns in the results of the questionnaires versus the interviews collected previously may help in identifying the differences and commonalities in multilingual practices.

The study points out the trend under examination in this case as well. It employs an approach that combines quantitative questionnaire responses from 20 other students with qualitative written responses from a different group of 20 students. The quantitative part examines the reported use of the language, attitudes of the students, and their identities as related to gender, culture, profession, and academics. The qualitative part shows how students explain the language they use.

Yet, the study does not hold that language preference is directly indicative of identity formation in discourse, but rather it uncovers how students themselves delineate their multilingual experiences. Thus, the contribution is a mixed-methods account of language preference, perceptions of gender, and identities in the context of higher education in Pakistan.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Theoretical Foundation

In multilingual classrooms, the selection of language does not depend solely on linguistic skills. Many students may prefer a language for its comfort, its appropriateness for a given academic task, or for the ability to express something in front of a certain audience. These choices also reveal an attitude towards confidence, respect, and identity. To investigate these relations, this study uses Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model and Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity.

Thus, the study uses the Markedness Model because it deals with the information about the use of languages in various classroom situations. Gender performativity serves as a complementary theory for understanding students' ideas about gender and their linguistic self-presentation.

Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model

According to Myers-Scotton (1993), people's choices regarding language are guided by norms and guidelines. According to the Markedness Model, while the unmarked choice generally corresponds to the predicted norms in a specific interaction, the marked choice diverges from them. Importantly, the meaning of the language used is contextual, rather than residing in that language itself.

Such a position is relevant to university students who use Pashto, Urdu, and English for communication. English is likely to be linked with academic activities, Urdu with communication between people speaking different languages, while Pashto may be associated with informal interaction between people who know each other. However, we cannot assume that the same is true for each individual involved. The language may have different meanings in different contexts, even in classrooms.

The study of code-switching and identity creation done by Shah et al. (2020) reflects the importance of language choices with socially significant meaning. According to their results, multilinguals use different languages to negotiate their identities at university as well as in everyday life. At the same time, Ramsay-Brijball (2004) argues that identity can be constructed via code-switching instead of being seen as a stable feature.

In the current research, the Markedness Model is utilized to analyze the reported language preferences of students during the presentations, answering teachers' questions, conversations among peers, and informal communication. Qualitative responses provide additional information regarding why the participants think that certain languages are suitable for certain situations. However, the analysis does not make it clear whether language switches are classified as marked or unmarked in practice.

Gender Performativity and Language

According to the theory of gender performativity put forward by Butler (1990), gender is not a permanent identity but rather a social concept. In a nutshell, gender is perceived as a continual process defined by certain social norms. Applying this point of view to language implies that we should study the way certain speaking practices are correlated with masculinity, femininity, or confidence.

There is a considerable amount of research proving this point. García-Sánchez (2010) conducted research on code-switching among Moroccan immigrant females and their pretended play. Stokoe (2005) proves the need for the analysis of the relevance of gender categories in social interaction, while in Pakistan, Farida et al. (2018) investigated code-switching in terms of gender identity among educated multilingual women in Sindhi, whereas Fatima et al. (2025) discussed the motivations of code-switching in terms of gender among university students.

The studies indicate that the link between language and gender may exist due to expectations of cultural norms. The participants in the present research are asked to answer some questions about whether male students tend to use Pashto more than female students, who may prefer either English or Urdu to demonstrate their formal demeanor. In addition, the written instruction clarifies how prevailing opinions on the differences between males and females in terms of confidence, politeness, and participation in lectures exist. Butler's viewpoint allows interpreting the above answers as attitudes regarding gender, and not as evidence of the presence of distinct male or female communication styles. Still, it is impossible to observe the interactional patterns in the process of implementing data collection, as due to the limitations of the questionnaire method, only attitudes and associations are studied.

Integrating the Theoretical Perspectives

The two theories describe all different aspects of multilingual interaction situations and appear to be interrelated. While the Markedness Model focuses on social expectations connected with the choice of one language, gender performativity explains why these expectations are associated with gender. Thus, the integration of the two ideas proves to be useful in cases when people recognize several functions in one language. For instance, people can perceive English as a symbol of academic self-confidence, while in regard to Urdu and Pashto, this may be due to the intention to be clear and respectful. Instead of stating that gender defines language use, the theory enables us to study linguistic preferences as well as gender-related issues altogether.

Analytical Application

The research employs this framework in two datasets involving 40 BS English students at the University of Science and Technology Bannu. The quantitative part consists of 20 structured questionnaires filled out by 10 male and 10 female students, wherein the respondents are asked about their use of Pashto, Urdu, and English in four classroom situations, attitude towards the switching of languages, and the relation of each language to academic, cultural, professional, and gender identity.

The qualitative part contains written responses to six open-ended questions from a different group of 20 students divided equally by gender. The qualitative data is analyzed thematically to explore participants' views of language switching, classroom expectations, confidence, perceptions influenced by gender, and respectful communication.

Quantitative results are described and compared across genders, and qualitative results are classified into categories and themes, ensuring the inclusion of differences and exceptional cases. After the organization of both parts, the data come together at group and thematic levels. Since participants are various people, the results from the questionnaire cannot be linked to qualitative explanations.

Thus, the framework allows linking the research questions of the study to the available evidence, while preserving a crucial distinction between reported practices and actual behavior. It is not about proving that some languages or actions belong to certain genders, but rather the investigation of students' perceptions of the meanings of multilingual communication in the academic world.

Methodology

Research Design

The current research utilized the cross-sectional methodology of mixed methods to unlock the issue of language choice, gender perceptions, and identity of BS English students. This study utilized a mixture of quantitative description of the results and qualitative interpretation of participants' opinions on the matter. The quantitative part aimed at finding the patterns of language usage, attitudes, and identity aspects, while the qualitative part was oriented towards exploring the students' narratives about multilingual experience.

A mixed methods approach is beneficial when there are patterns in data represented numerically and descriptions from subjects regarding the same issue (Creswell &Plano Clark, 2018). The two sets of data were analyzed separately and combined at the stage of interpretation of the results. However, the study can be referred to as an exploratory descriptive design since it does not involve any experimental manipulation or attempt to establish any cause-effect relationships.

Research Setting, Participants, and Sampling

The research was undertaken at the University of Science and Technology Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, in May and June 2025. A total of 40 BS English linguistics and literature students participated in the study in two different groups. The quantitative segment had 20 students (10 male and 10 female), while the qualitative section was conducted among 20 students (10 male and 10 female).

The volunteer sample was taken through the convenience sampling method. As for the quantitative data collection method, the researchers managed to get 50 filled-in questionnaires. The present analysis is based on 20 questionnaires that were taken from the total number because of their adequacy in information output necessary for understanding the patterns of language use, identities, and outlooks. The selected sample included an equal number of males and females so that comparative descriptions would be available.

The sample taken in this way appears to be purposive and therefore does not inform us about the reliability of original sampling procedures. Thus, the findings of the gender comparison should not be generalized beyond the chosen respondents.

Research Instruments

Two formats of questionnaires were utilized. The structured quantitative questionnaire comprised four sections. The first gathered demographic information, such as gender, age, course of study, field of study, native language, and spoken languages. The second one included 12 language use ratings of Pashto, Urdu, and English in four situations: for making presentations, responding to teachers' questions, for group discussions, and informal conversations. The answers varied from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

The third part included seven statements about confidence in the English language, anxiety in using Pashto, the function of Urdu, gender speech expectations, academic identity, and how teachers treat students. The answers were rated on a five-point agreement scale. The fourth part included 12 ratings about how much each language corresponds to the academic, cultural, professional, and gender identity of the respondents, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely).

The qualitative questionnaire included six open-ended questions which asked about the reasons for code-switching, the distinctions between the ways one communicates with teachers and peers, the perceived gender differences, the languages of preference in making presentations, conscious language shifts, and expectations about respectfulness in classroom communication. These were questionnaire answers, not research interviews. Both methods were based on self-reports, and none of them recorded actual code-switching events.

Instrument Review and Pilot Testing

Before the primary data collection, two experts in the English Department reviewed the structured questionnaire and tested it on six students. The main aim of the pilot study was to find ambiguous terms and determine whether the respondents could understand the questions and answer choices. After that, minor changes in terms were made.

The six pilot respondents were also the respondents of the main research study. However, since no participant records relate to the completed questionnaires during data preparation, it is impossible to know whether any of the respondents chosen for quantitative data analysis belonged to these six subjects.

Although the changes made affected only wording and clarity of the questions, not the constructs, the equivalence of the two questionnaires could not be established independently, and the pilot study and subject teacher review were considered as an initial step for better clarity of the instrument, rather than formal psychometric validation.

Qualitative Questionnaire and Translation

In the qualitative aspect, participants had to provide written answers to a series of six open-ended questions. The 20 students participating in this component were not included in the quantitative analysis. The questions examined participants' motivations to switch languages, their communicative habits with teachers and classmates, their opinion regarding gender-based distinctions, their language preference while giving presentations, the role of language-related confidence in making choices, and their ideas about respectful communication.

Answers to the questions were primarily written in English and, in case of any Urdu responses, they were translated into easy-to-understand English, keeping the meaning intact. Translation was done by a qualified subject expert who reviewed the translated versions.

The translation has been included in the qualitative data set together with the original English responses. The analysis of the answers has been achieved by focusing on the meanings the participants tried to convey instead of paying attention to the language of the participants.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed within a framework of themes and thus were affected by the theoretical approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodology was suitable as the objective of the research was to determine patterns of meaning in students' descriptions of communicating in the multilingual classroom but not the use of specific words in their accounts.

The analysis was facilitated by the six open-ended questions and the two research questions of the study. The preliminary analysis allowed for the identification of various insights related to the issues of comprehension in the classroom, language preferences, self-assurance, etc. The related statements were merged into different chief themes.

The analysis led to the emergence of five primary themes: (1) the use of multilingual switching in classroom understanding; (2) classroom context and expectations regarding the language employed; (3) diverse perceptions and conflicts regarding gender-related practices of language use; (4) language preference, self-assurance, and identity; (5) decent multicultural communication methods.

Along with responses that showed deviation from the conventional viewpoints, interpretation took into account participant responses where some of them mentioned their preferences with respect to gender language while others did not report any differences at all or stressed that communication should not be gender dependent. Making use of these different interpretations has allowed us to avoid the tendency to view gender expectations as universal norms.

Then, themes were evaluated together with quantitative data in order to find areas of concordance, complementarity, and discrepancies. Due to the fact that participants for qualitative and quantitative research comprised different groups, the integration was performed at the level of themes and groups instead of individual-level comparisons.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Approval for undertaking research in the classroom was obtained from the head of the English department and the relevant teachers. Participation in the study was voluntary, and written consent was given for using structured questionnaires. Since the consent forms carried signatures on the original questionnaire sheets, those records were identified at the time of collection, but the information related to identity was not included in the analytical dataset and reporting. Institutional approval from the ethics committee is not claimed because it has not been obtained.

Some constraints must be considered. The research was conducted on a small-sized convenience sample from only one department, and therefore the results cannot be generalized. The use of self-reported language may differ from actual behavior in class. The quantitative tool used was not formally validated, while qualitative data consisted of written responses and no recordings or interviews. These limitations affect the understanding of the results and conclusions.

Results and Findings

Overview of the Findings

The results are presented according to the two research questions of the study. The first question addresses how often students report the use of Pashto, Urdu, and English in their classrooms, and what their attitudes

and identities associated with those languages are. The second question looks at the differences between male and female respondents and how students explain the reasons for their language choice considering classroom expectations, self-confidence, and gender.

The analysis relies on two independent sets of data: responses to a structured questionnaire provided by twenty students (ten males and ten females) and the written qualitative comments from another twenty students (ten males and ten females). The quantitative data are reported in a descriptive way, followed by identifying the themes based on the qualitative responses. The findings of both datasets are compared to highlight similarities and discrepancies.

Language Choice Across Classroom Contexts

The language preferences of students depended on the classroom situation. English received the highest mean frequency scores for both females (M = 4.10) and males (M = 4.00) in the presentation context (Table 1). Pashto fared much worse in this context for both males and females (M = 1.70 and 1.50, respectively). When answering the questions posed by teachers, English again received relatively high mean scores, such as 3.80 for females and 4.10 for males.

Usage of languages varied in conversations with classmates. Respondents reported that females use Urdu a lot while conversing among peers (M = 4.67, n = 9) as compared to males (M = 3.10). However, usage of Pashto was reported to be slightly higher by males (M = 3.60) than by females (M = 3.10).

According to informal talks, the outcomes diverged. The women who replied to the questionnaire were found to use Pashto and Urdu equally (M = 3.90 for both), whereas the men tended to favor Pashto (M = 3.50) over Urdu (M = 3.00). English was also used in informal conversations, which indicates that the study participants reported using the three languages simultaneously but in different contexts.

In overall terms, the pattern of findings reveals that English was more associated with formal education activities, while peer interaction showed a wider variety of indicated languages.

Table 1

Reported Language-Use Frequency by Classroom Context and Gender

Classroom context	Language	Female (M)	Male (M)
Presentations	Pashto	1.70	1.50
	Urdu	3.40	3.10
	English	4.10	4.00
Answering teachers' questions	Pashto	1.70	2.40
	Urdu	3.30	3.30
	English	3.80	4.10
Peer group discussions	Pashto	3.10	3.60
	Urdu	4.67	3.10
	English	3.00	3.40
Informal conversations (before or after class)	Pashto	3.90	3.50
	Urdu	3.90	3.00
	English	3.80	3.30

Note. Values are descriptive means on a five-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always). Female n = 10 and male n = 10, except for female Urdu use in peer discussions (n = 9).

Table 1 Reported Language-Use Frequency by Classroom Context and Gender

Language Attitudes and Perceptions

Responses to attitude items revealed different meanings assigned by students to their language choices. Male respondents had a higher average agreement with the attitude connecting English with a high level of confidence (M = 4.30) than female respondents (M = 3.50); however, the variation in responses indicates that both groups interpreted the level of confidence differently.

The two groups showed agreement regarding the claim that there is a connection between code-switching and academic identity (female M = 4.00; male M = 3.90). Thus, it appears that the participants often thought of multilingual communication as part of their academic experience rather than simply as a substitute for English. Information regarding the related language expectations differed considerably among respondents. For instance, while a mean rating of 2.90 was reported for female respondents' agreement with the statement that male students use the Pashto language more than other students, male respondents gave a mean rating of 3.20. Also, male respondents rated the statement regarding female students being associated with the use of English/Urdu language as 3.70, whereas female respondents rated it as 3.40.

These findings depict that gender-related expectations are present among some respondents, but there is no consensus among the respondents. Thus, the research results do not imply a clear differentiation between male and female language practices.

Language and Identity Associations

The relationship among languages and identity dimensions, including academic identity, cultural identity, professional identity, and gender identity, was evaluated by study participants.

The strongest association with professional identity was found for English in both groups (female M = 4.00; male M = 4.44). Regarding academic identity, participants gave Urdu and English the same mean rates in the case of female respondents (both M = 3.70) and the highest mean rating to English in the case of male respondents (M = 3.78).

Pashto was noted to have a bigger relationship with cultural identity, especially among male respondents (M = 4.56), as compared to female respondents (M = 3.40). Caution is required while interpreting this discrepancy because the quantitative sample of females consisted of respondents whose first languages were Urdu and Saraiki, while for males the sample was made only of respondents reporting Pashto.

Differences in relation to gender were noticeable in identity associations. Male participants showed a higher mean correlation between gender and Pashto (M = 4.33) compared to females (M = 2.70). Nonetheless, the identity ratings represent the perceptions of the participants but do not provide evidence on how the identities are performed during classroom interaction.

Identity relations show that the participants assigned different meanings to all three languages. English was the most prominent language in professional and educational associations, while Pashto was more associated with cultural identity according to some participants. But this is a general pattern that did not hold true for all respondents and for all identity categories.

Table 2

Language–Identity Associations by Gender

Identity dimension	Language	Female (M)	Male (M)
Academic identity	Pashto	2.30	3.11
	Urdu	3.70	3.22
	English	3.70	3.78
Cultural identity	Pashto	3.40	4.56
	Urdu	3.50	2.89
	English	2.30	2.33
Professional identity	Pashto	1.80	2.67
	Urdu	2.30	3.44
	English	4.00	4.44
Gender-related identity	Pashto	2.70	4.33
	Urdu	3.00	3.44
	English	3.67	4.00

Note. Values are descriptive means on a five-point scale (1 = Not at all, 5 = Completely). Female n = 10 and male n = 9 for the items above (female n = 9 for the English–gender identity item).

Qualitative Findings: Students' Explanations of Language Choice

The qualitative analysis identified five themes that link to each other in the text responses. Most of the responses were written in English; those that were written in Urdu were translated into plain English, with the help of a language expert. The themes highlight the ways in which students understood their use of different languages and the expectations related to classroom communication.

Theme 1: Multilingual Switching is Effective for Communication and Understanding Purposes

The participants sometimes pointed out that switching from one language to another is viewed as a method of communicating challenging ideas and enriching dialogue in classroom sessions. Female 5 explained that she switched to Urdu and Pashto in order to clarify some difficult academic terms, as these languages were more appropriate for delivering her message. Male 2 emphasized that switching to other languages is linked to coherence and accessibility, as well as to interconnection with other cultures.

From these examples, it is suggested that the participants viewed the act of multilingual switching as effective in terms of communication. Rather than only treating it because of shortcomings in their knowledge of English, they pointed out that switching allows them to communicate effective ideas to other people.

Theme 2: **Academic Context Affects Language Choices**

Students learned to differentiate between languages that are good for formal academic activities and those that are better for informal communication. Thus, they linked academic English to presentations and interactions with their teachers while Urdu and Pashto served as languages for discussion, reaching mutual understanding, and being informal.

However, not all of them agreed regarding the good language for formal activities. For instance, Male 8 stated that he would speak Urdu during the presentations but would prefer Pashto while speaking informally; in contrast, Female 7 said that at first she would present in English for confidence and switch to Urdu later so that the audience could better understand her.

Theme 3: **Expectations about Language and Gender are Complex and Inconsistent**

Some participants observed that male students make more use of Pashto while female students favor formal rather than informal use of English or Urdu. For instance, Female 5 asserted that male students are most likely to speak Pashto or informally speak Urdu while female students are viewed as using English or Urdu in formal situations.

Other participants challenged these notions. Male 4 claimed that he had not noticed any such differences, while Female 7 admitted that her views were not based on observation. As such, the qualitative results revealed the different perceptions about gender and language. While there were gender-related expectations in many participants' responses, they were not universally shared nor confirmed by personal experience.

Theme 4: Language Choice can be a Means of Conveying Confidence and Identity

Some respondents described forthcoming language switching to convey their confidence, respect, or connection to the culture. Female 7 recalled stating in English at the beginning of the presentation to show her confidence and then switching to Urdu for greater clarity.

Male 2 explained, “Yes, at times I switch to English to sound confident or to Urdu/Pashto for sounding respectful and relatable.”

This quotation shows that people can attach different meanings to different languages. But not every participant switched languages intentionally. Male 1 and Male 5 did not indicate their brief language switches as an intentional act for affecting others’ perceptions.

The results imply that language choice may play a role in self-presentation, although the amount of conscious effort to apply this technique might vary among the participants.

Theme 5: Respect and Inclusion are Viewed as more Important in Communication than Established Gender Expectations

Another theme related to respectful communication. Some respondents point out that students should use language that meets the criteria of clarity, politeness, and the needs of the audience. Female 7 put forward the idea of the necessity of avoiding offensive language. Male 2 made a similar remark:

"I want both male and female students to have equal confidence, respect and clarity when speaking. I think that ideas should be in focus regardless of the way the language is used."

These responses indicate that some students valued inclusive communication more than cliché expectations towards the way men or women should communicate. It also means that some participants were not entirely sharing gender norms.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Evaluating both datasets together gives a better understanding of students' multilingual experiences. Based on the quantitative results, English is frequently used during presentations and communicative interactions with the instructor. The qualitative aspects provided reasons for this observation by indicating the presence of academic expectations, confidence, and perceived appropriateness of English for formal activities. At the same time, the writers made it clear that Urdu and Pashto enhanced understanding and facilitated interpersonal communication.

Also, both the datasets provided valuable perspectives on identity. The quantitative respondents strongly related English to professional identity and Pashto to cultural identity. The qualitative respondents explained how the choice of language reflects such emotions as confidence, knowledge, respect, and belonging. While these narrations provided insights into the social meanings of languages, they did not lead to any individual explanations associated with the answers given by the respondents in the surveys.

The findings concerning gender issues were more complex than those concerning language and culture. Certain quantitative distinctions were detectable in students' stated language usage while having discussions with their friends and their association with Pashto language identities. Nevertheless, qualitative data demonstrated that participants did not agree on the role of gender in their language choice. All this shows that gender alone cannot explain the language preferences of students. To sum up, results showed that students were using more than just academic, social, and pragmatic dimensions to understand multilingual communication in classrooms.

Discussion

Classroom Context and Language Choice

The results indicate that the situation of classrooms has a significant influence on the language choices students reported. English received the most frequent ratings in the situation of presentations and during interaction with teachers. In contrast, peer discussions and informal conversations involved considerably more use of Pashto, Urdu, and English. The data show that the students' language choices differ and depend on the characteristics of the different academic contexts.

The findings are in agreement with the previous research by Kartika-Ningsih and Rose (2018), in which they found that the language variation in multilingual classrooms is closely connected to the purpose and features of interaction. Also, Shartiely (2016) discovered that code-switching can contribute to communication in university classrooms. The present research contributes to these findings by demonstrating the students' preferences in four particular classroom contexts.

The tighter relationship between English and formal academic situations could be a result of its place in the BS English curriculum. Learners may see English as the proper means of showing public intellectual capacities or communicating with instructors. However, the qualitative analysis has suggested that the use of English is not always the most straightforward solution for communicating. Several interviewees reported switching to either Urdu or Pashto if they wanted to ensure that their classmates could hear hard ideas.

The finding about the relationship of English and the academic setting is also consistent with the conclusions made by Nawaz et al. (2023) concerning the helpful nature of code-switching in college classes in Pakistan. The present findings suggest that multilingual communications fulfill both the academic requirements and help students understand the matter at hand better.

Language Choice, Confidence, and Identity

The results also show that students attribute different identity meanings to Pashto, Urdu, and English. English is ranked much higher as a professional identity in both genders, while it is also linked to an academic identity. When it comes to Pashto, it has a strong cultural identity connotation, especially among males. This indicates that students could be using different languages depending on the aspect of identity they want to communicate.

Shah et al. (2020) found a similar thing about the use of code-switching by Pakistani university students and teachers in order to present their hybrid identities. Their results prove that there is no need to choose between local and academic identities, as code-switchers may use as many linguistic resources as required by their social or educational background.

The current study confirms this interpretation, notwithstanding the fact that the obtained evidence is based on perceived links rather than actual interactions. Responses of the students indicate that English is seen as a powerful instrument for achievement and a key to successful occupations, while Pashto is associated with a sense of belonging to the culture. Urdu is supposed to be a common language in this situation.

The findings correlate with the ideas of Cummins (2000), who has put emphasis on the connection between language, identity, and recognition in multilingual classrooms.

Gender Differences and Social Expectations

The second research question investigated the differences between the students based on sex. There were some descriptive differences noted; however, they did not form a single pattern. The male respondents showed a greater average agreement to the statement that English is associated with confidence. In addition, they showed a stronger association between the Pashto language and gender identity. Furthermore, the female respondents showed quite a frequent usage of the Urdu language in discussions among peers.

These differences may show the differences between the participants in relation to the experiences related to the expectations in the classroom, cultural belonging, and linguistic confidence. Therefore, it should not be considered that these differences are fixed for male and female students.

The results have some similarities with those of the study conducted by Farida et al. (2018), who researched the connection between code-switching and gender identity of the multilingual women of the Sindhi community, and are also relevant to the findings of the study by Fatima et al. (2025) that revealed gender-based differences in the motivations associated with code-switching in the case of Pakistani university students. Yet, this research has not proven women's inclination towards the use of formal speech style and men's tendency to use Pashto.

That being said, the qualitative results shed light on the underlying complexity of the situation, as some of the students voiced the existence of gender stereotypes that affect the choice of the language used, while others either found no differences or rejected the idea of a gender-based approach to language selection.

According to Stokoe (2005), gender is something to look at as a construct rather than a static cause of speech behavior. A similar caution is offered by Butler (1990) when she speaks about gender performativity. This ultimately means that respondents' answers reflect social expectations regarding their attitude towards confidence, communication, and formality. However, the surveys used in this work do not allow showing interactional practices that lead to gender enactment.

Thus, the findings indicate that gender may be one of the factors affecting students' attitudes towards language used by students but cannot be the only reason explaining linguistic choices taken.

Interpreting the Findings Through the Markedness Model

According to Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, the correlation between languages and classrooms can be better understood. As per the model, our choice of language is determined by our understanding of social interactions and roles.

The fact that students prefer English when giving presentations indicates that they have a clear idea of what language is required in formal academic situations. Conversely, students' use of Urdu or Pashto in discussions indicates that they expect a comfortable or informal atmosphere.

An individual interviewed for the study explained that they often begin their presentations in English to come across as confident and then switched to Urdu to ensure that the audience understood. The example suggests that certain language choices may serve different communicative functions while engaging in the same activity.

The result is in line with the general premise that those speaking more than one language react to evolving social demands, but it would be wrong to refer to the examples described in terms of marked and unmarked communication studies without having sufficient recordings of the interaction in question. As a result, the model provides an interpretative account rather than a verified one on how the language works in the classroom.

Explaining Differences Between the Present Study and Earlier Research

There are several characteristics of this investigation that may shed light on the different findings of this study and other studies. For one, the study was conducted in the BS English Linguistics and Literature program. Here, English may be perceived as having stronger academic value as compared to cases when English is not the course of study. Thus, this may explain why English was emphasized in the delivery of presentations and communicating with the instructors.

Secondly, the participants were mainly from a Pashto-speaking environment. Therefore, it is likely that the Pashto language has its specific meanings in the cultural and social contexts that are different from those in the studies dealing with different languages. Khan and Muysken (2014) referred to the linguistic level of Pashto/English code-switching, but the results of the current investigation imply that students' understanding of the choice of languages may also be associated with their educational status and identity.

Thirdly, the measurement of language use and identity was based on self-reporting of data on the matter. Prior research has, for instance, either used audio-visual recordings or direct observation (Shah et al., 2020) to ascertain how language is used in real-life interactions. However, the current data is about how respondents think, perceive, and account for their practices. As a result, differences between the studies in question can be derived not only from differing responses by participants, but also from contrasting approaches.

Lastly, the limited sample size and the lack of equal distribution of the language background of participants according to the gender criteria may also influence the results.

Implications for Multilingual Higher Education

According to the findings, it has become apparent that analysis of language usage by students in multilingual classrooms in higher education might bring them benefits. Though academic English is important for their educational development, the usage of regular Urdu and Pashto is also relevant for basic communication.

Thus, teachers in the given context should think about implementing organized multilingual communication among people, accompanied by the necessity to use academic English. It should be noted that even though this solution allows the application of several languages in the study process, it does not mean that all languages can be easily substituted for one another.

The results further indicate that the assumption that boys and girls would have stable language preferences should not be made by educational providers. In this case, it is possible that the approaches to classroom participation must be viewed through the prism of student factors, such as linguistic origin, confidence, and comprehension.

These conclusions still have limitations in terms of reliability because of the small sample size. Yet, the research shows that it is essential to analyze the direct experiences of students when studying issues related to multilingualism in the context of higher education.

Conclusion

This research study explored languages that BS students of English at the University of Science and Technology Bannu planned to use within multilingual classrooms that included the use of Pashto, Urdu, and English. The research also examined the connection that students made between these languages and their educational, cultural, professional, and gender identity. The combination of quantitative questionnaire responses and qualitative written accounts reveals the connection between language use and expectations in class.

The results indicate that the language chosen in class is determined by the circumstances. English was the most used language in presentations, as well as in answering the teachers' questions. Moreover, Urdu and Pashto are significant languages for the student body, especially when carrying out peer communication. According to the students, they use different languages in order to explain something complicated to their peers and help them understand better. The data also suggest that language practice can be used for academic and social needs.

In addition, the researchers discovered how students associated different languages with identity. English language is mostly connected to professional aspirations, while the Pashto language is relevant to the sense of culture. In comparison with gender aspects, the results are not that clear. Some of the male and female respondents have different views, but in qualitative interviews the picture is much different. Thus, one can conclude that gender factors alone cannot explain language behavior.

In conclusion, the present study offers a context-specific insight into multilingualism within higher education institutions in Pakistan. It demonstrates the importance of researching reported language practices, as well as students' interpretations.

Nevertheless, the results should be interpreted with caution. The study made use of a small group of respondents, which was purposely chosen for quantitative analysis, and of a separate qualitative group from one department in one university. The information was based on self-reported data, as opposed to the analysis of documented data. Hence, the results cannot provide evidence of causal links or generalizations.

Future research can involve larger and more diversified samples, recordings of the classroom process, and studying the linguistic principles of different academic disciplines. Investigating such issues can help students understand how language and gender are formed in the process of communication.

The findings of the study show that a successful multilingual education should acknowledge the diversity of languages among students in the process of assisting their learning of academic English. Providing conditions for effective and respectful communication may help to improve the level of students' involvement without ignoring their cultural backgrounds.

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