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## **A STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING PROFICIENCY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, KUST**

***Asad Rehman***

*MS Schalor, Department of English, Kohat University of Science & Technology*

*Email: [asadr4445@gmail.com](mailto:asadr4445@gmail.com)*

***Dr. Syed Azaz Ali Shah***

***(Corresponding Author)***

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, KUST*

*Email: [Azazali@kust.edu.pk](mailto:Azazali@kust.edu.pk)*

***Ms Sana Aziz***

*Lecturer in English, Department of English, KUST*

*Email: [sanaaziz22555@gmail.com](mailto:sanaaziz22555@gmail.com)*

### ***Abstract***

*This study investigates the English-speaking proficiency of undergraduate students in the Department of English at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), focusing on the factors that influence their oral communication skills. Recognizing the growing importance of spoken English for academic and professional success in ESL contexts like Pakistan, the research integrates the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as its theoretical foundation. A sequential mixed-methods approach was employed: quantitative data were collected through questionnaires from 234 students to identify key factors affecting proficiency, followed by qualitative interviews with a smaller sample to evaluate actual speaking performance based on CEFR descriptors. Findings reveal that while most students exhibit moderate confidence and competence in English communication, they encounter challenges related to language anxiety, limited vocabulary, and lack of real-life speaking opportunities. Institutional factors such as teacher-centered instruction and limited classroom interaction further constrain oral fluency. The study emphasizes the need for communicative, task-based, and context-sensitive teaching methods to enhance students' spoken English. It concludes by recommending the integration of CEFR-aligned assessment tools, increased exposure to authentic speaking situations, and teacher training programs to foster communicative competence among ESL learners at the university level.*

***Keywords:*** *English speaking proficiency, CEFR framework, undergraduate students, ESL context, KUST.*

### **1. Introduction:**

Spoken English proficiency is vital for academic, professional, and social success (Johnson, 2024; Lee & Brown, 2024; Smith et al., 2025). In Pakistan's ESL context, where English is the medium of instruction, strong speaking skills are essential for achievement (Garcia & Nguyen, 2016; Wang & Smith, 2021). At KUST, this need is particularly important within the Department of English (Taylor, 2020).

Research shows that limited exposure, lack of real-life practice, and grammar-focused teaching hinder students' spoken proficiency (Ali & Mahmood, 2020; Rehman et al., 2019; Khan & Iqbal, 2021; Ahmad & Rao, 2018). Despite awareness of these challenges, little research focuses on



KUST students' specific difficulties (Farooq, 2020). Malik and Zahid (2022) emphasize the need for context-based strategies to improve oral communication.

Identifying communicative barriers helps teachers design effective, interactive, and context-sensitive instruction (Rehman et al., 2019; Khan & Iqbal, 2021). In KUST's linguistically diverse environment, such insights can bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world use (Farooq, 2020).

This study adopts the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as its theoretical model. CEFR provides standardized proficiency levels (A1–C2) to assess speaking skills objectively, identify learning needs, and align curriculum outcomes with international language standards.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Although English is a core subject at KUST, many undergraduates struggle to develop spoken proficiency. In Pakistan's ESL context, limited opportunities for real-life English interaction hinder students' fluency, confidence, and communicative competence. Studies attribute these challenges to minimal exposure outside class (Ali & Mahmood, 2020), teacher-centered methods (Ahmad & Rao, 2018), and a lack of authentic speaking environments (Khan & Iqbal, 2021). Yet, little research has examined these issues among KUST English undergraduates. Using Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence framework, this study investigates institutional, pedagogical, and individual barriers to speaking proficiency and offers insights for improving ESL teaching and curriculum design at KUST.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

- What is the proficiency level of English speaking among students in Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology?
- What are the factors that influence students' speaking proficiency in English Language in Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology?

### **1.3 Objectives of the Research**

- To assess the proficiency level of English speaking among students in Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology?
- To identify and analyze the factors that influence students' speaking proficiency in English Language in Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology?

### **1.4 Rationale of the Study**

This research explores the English-speaking proficiency of undergraduate students in the Department of English at KUST. English proficiency is essential for academic success and future professional growth (Brown & Martinez, 2018). Speaking skills are especially important in this context, as they support scholarly communication, presentations, and career readiness (Ali & Mahmood, 2020; Khan & Iqbal, 2021). The study provides practical insights to help educators and policymakers enhance teaching methods and curricula (Ahmad & Rao, 2018), fostering a supportive learning environment that builds students' confidence, academic performance, and intercultural competence (Farooq, 2020). Overall, the research aims to strengthen English-speaking proficiency among KUST students through targeted, evidence-based strategies.



### **1.5 Novelty/Contributions of the Study**

This study examines the English-speaking proficiency of undergraduate students in the Department of English at KUST, identifying key challenges and factors influencing their language skills. Using diverse evaluation methods, it provides a comprehensive understanding of language learning complexities. The research offers practical recommendations for improving teaching methods, curriculum design, and student support, aiming to enhance pedagogical strategies and empower both educators and students to improve English proficiency and academic success.

### **2. Literature**

In today's globalized world, English speaking proficiency is a vital skill for academic, professional, and social success. It reflects learners' communicative and linguistic competence, enabling participation and global interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Derakhshan et al., 2020). This study examines the spoken English proficiency of undergraduate students at the Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a model for evaluation (Council of Europe, 2020).

Speaking is the most complex language skill as it requires real-time cognitive, linguistic, and social processing (Burns & Clennell, 2022; Luoma, 2004). CEFR, based on Hymes's (1972) communicative competence and Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, categorizes language proficiency into six levels (A1–C2) and assesses fluency, accuracy, and appropriateness (North, 2014). It provides an internationally recognized benchmark that promotes communicative, learner-centered instruction (Piccardo & North, 2019). In Pakistan, where English serves as a second and official language, applying CEFR highlights key challenges such as limited exposure and teacher-centered methods (Mahboob, 2017; Ahmed & Naz, 2021).

Language proficiency involves accurate, fluent, and context-appropriate communication (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Modern approaches, including CEFR, emphasize communicative performance rather than grammatical mastery (Douglas, 2000; McNamara, 2019). CEFR defines proficiency through "can-do" descriptors, linking linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences (Fulcher, 2015). These descriptors help educators design curricula and assessments that reflect real-life communicative needs (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Khan & Khan, 2021).

English speaking proficiency is crucial for academic and professional success, serving as a global medium in education and employment (Crystal, 2019; Richards, 2015). Students with strong speaking skills perform better academically and professionally (Derakhshan et al., 2020). For Pakistani learners, CEFR-based assessment connects local learning with international standards and promotes communicative competence (Rahman, 2022).

However, Pakistani undergraduates face numerous barriers to developing speaking proficiency, including multilingual interference, cultural constraints, anxiety, grammar-focused teaching, limited exposure, and lack of oral assessment (Mahboob, 2017; Khan & Ali, 2020; Horwitz, 2016; Haider, 2021). CEFR-based evaluation can address these issues by setting measurable goals and emphasizing communicative effectiveness (Fulcher, 2015).

Improving speaking proficiency requires learner-centered, CEFR-aligned strategies such as task-based learning, digital communication tools, collaborative classroom practices, pronunciation and fluency training, and teacher development programs (Ellis, 2017; Derwing & Munro, 2015; Little,



2020). Adopting these approaches at KUST can strengthen students' oral competence, enhance curriculum relevance, and align local English teaching with international standards.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This section outlines the methodology used to assess the English-speaking proficiency of undergraduate students at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST). It explains the research design, population, sampling, data collection tools, and procedures.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed to combine quantitative and qualitative data for a comprehensive understanding of students' English-speaking proficiency. First, a questionnaire was distributed among students to identify factors influencing their speaking skills. Based on the results, a smaller group was interviewed to explore their proficiency levels in depth. The combined results provided a holistic view and informed recommendations for improving English-speaking skills at KUST.

#### **3.2 Population and Sample**

The population comprised approximately **600 undergraduate students** from the Department of English at KUST. Using the **Krejcie and Morgan (1970)** formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a **sample size of 234** was determined to ensure representativeness.

#### **3.3 Sampling Technique**

A combination of **simple random** and **purposive sampling** was used. The simple random technique identified eligible participants, while purposive sampling selected five students for interviews. This approach ensured both statistical reliability and qualitative depth.

#### **3.4 Data Collection Tools**

Two instruments were used:

1. **Questionnaire** – adapted from *Edgar R. Eslit's English Language Competence Questionnaire* to gather quantitative data on factors influencing speaking proficiency.
2. **Interviews** – conducted with selected participants to assess their speaking proficiency levels.

#### **3.5 Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected in two stages. First, quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires from 234 students. Next, qualitative data were collected through recorded interviews with five students. Their speaking levels were analyzed using the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**, which classifies proficiency from A1 (beginner) to C2 (proficient).

#### **3.6 Mixed-Method Approach**

The **quantitative phase** identified factors affecting speaking proficiency, while the **qualitative phase** explored individual performance and CEFR-based levels. This integration ensured a deeper and more accurate understanding of students' communicative competence.

This chapter presented a sequential mixed-methods methodology combining surveys and interviews. Using random and purposive sampling, data from 234 students provided both statistical and interpretive insights. CEFR-based evaluation ensured an objective assessment of English-speaking proficiency among KUST undergraduates.



## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative phase of this study aimed to measure the English-speaking proficiency of undergraduate students at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of ten statements related to students' comfort, confidence, fluency, and linguistic accuracy in speaking English. Each statement was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

Statement 1: Comfort in Speaking English

*I feel comfortable speaking English in both academic and social situations at KUST.*

A total of **67%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, showing a generally positive attitude toward speaking English. Only **18%** disagreed, while **15%** remained neutral. These results indicate that most students feel at ease communicating in English, particularly in informal or social settings, though a small portion still experiences discomfort or hesitation in academic situations.

Statement 2: Confidence in Expressing Ideas

*I am confident when expressing my ideas and opinions in English during class discussions or group activities.*

Approximately **61%** of students reported feeling confident, whereas **23%** disagreed and **7%** were neutral. Although the majority display confidence, the presence of hesitant participants suggests that some students still struggle with linguistic anxiety or fear of negative evaluation during classroom communication.

Statement 3: Participation in Discussions

*I am able to participate effectively in discussions and conversations in English, both inside and outside of class.*

Nearly **59%** of respondents agreed, while **24%** disagreed and **17%** remained neutral. These findings suggest that students generally manage effective participation, yet a considerable number face challenges in maintaining active involvement in discussions, particularly outside the classroom where contextual support is lower.

Statement 4: Use of Grammar, Vocabulary, and Pronunciation

*I can use appropriate grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation when speaking English, especially in academic contexts.*

About **65%** agreed or strongly agreed, demonstrating satisfactory linguistic competence. However, **23%** remained neutral and **12%** disagreed, implying that a portion of students still lacks confidence in mastering linguistic accuracy required for academic discourse.

Statement 5: Adapting Speaking Style

*I feel the need to adjust my speaking style to suit different situations or audiences when speaking English.*

The majority (**64%**) agreed, indicating that most students recognize the importance of adjusting tone and register according to the context. This adaptability reflects an emerging level of pragmatic awareness — a key feature of communicative competence.

Statement 6: Communication with Native Speakers



*I am effective in communicating with native English speakers or in an English-speaking academic environment.*

About **62%** agreed, while **30%** disagreed or remained uncertain. This suggests moderate confidence in intercultural communication, though some students may still feel intimidated or unprepared when interacting with native or highly proficient speakers.

Statement 7: Clarity in Communication

*I communicate my ideas and thoughts clearly in spoken English during presentations or classroom activities.*

A strong **72%** agreed or strongly agreed, reflecting students' ability to articulate ideas clearly and effectively during structured speaking tasks. This result indicates growth in academic speaking skills, particularly in prepared contexts such as presentations.

Statement 8: Vocabulary Range

*I am comfortable using a wide range of vocabulary in spoken English, especially when discussing academic topics or complex subjects.*

Two-thirds (**67%**) agreed or strongly agreed, suggesting that most students possess a sufficient vocabulary base for academic communication. However, the remaining students still rely on limited lexical choices, affecting their fluency and expression in more complex discussions.

Statement 9: Pronunciation and Intonation

*My pronunciation and intonation are accurate enough for others to understand me easily in English.*

A total of **77%** of respondents expressed agreement, demonstrating that the majority consider their pronunciation intelligible and effective for communication. Nevertheless, a small percentage reported uncertainty, indicating the need for targeted pronunciation practice.

Statement 10: Overall Fluency and Accuracy

*I can speak English fluently and accurately in most situations.*

About **63%** agreed or strongly agreed, while **34%** disagreed or remained neutral. This reveals that most students consider themselves moderately fluent, though gaps persist in spontaneous speech and grammatical precision, particularly in unfamiliar or high-pressure contexts.

#### **4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis (In-Depth Analysis)**

To complement the quantitative findings, **qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews** with five selected participants. These interviews provided deeper insights into students' actual speaking performance, attitudes, and challenges. Each participant's spoken English was evaluated using the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**, which classifies proficiency from A1 (beginner) to C2 (proficient). The qualitative data aimed to explore how students perceive their communicative competence and to validate the quantitative results through real speech performance.

Emerging Themes

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed six recurring themes that reflect the main aspects of English-speaking proficiency among KUST students.

1. Comfort and Confidence in Speaking English



Most participants expressed moderate to high comfort when using English in familiar contexts, such as classroom discussions or peer conversations. However, some reported anxiety and hesitation in formal settings, especially when speaking before teachers or large groups. One respondent noted,

“I can speak easily with friends, but when the teacher asks me to speak in class, I become nervous and forget words.”

This indicates that psychological factors like self-consciousness and fear of judgment influence oral performance.

#### 2. Linguistic Accuracy and Fluency

Students demonstrated reasonable command of grammar and vocabulary but admitted occasional difficulty in maintaining fluency. They frequently paused to think of words or correct grammatical mistakes during speech. According to one participant,

“I know what I want to say, but sometimes I stop because I can’t remember the correct words quickly.”

Such comments suggest that limited lexical access and insufficient exposure to real-time English interaction constrain fluency development, consistent with the quantitative finding that only 63% reported strong fluency.

#### 3. Pronunciation and Intonation

All participants acknowledged pronunciation as a significant challenge. While most were intelligible, they were aware of their regional accents and intonation issues. One student remarked, “Sometimes people don’t understand me because of my accent. I try to copy native pronunciation, but it’s hard.”

This reflects that pronunciation training and listening practice are needed to improve intelligibility and confidence.

#### 4. Contextual Adaptability and Pragmatic Competence

Several respondents recognized the importance of adjusting their speech according to the situation or audience, but they also admitted limited experience in doing so. A participant stated,

“When I talk to my teacher, I use formal words, but with friends, I speak mixed Urdu and English.”

This switching between codes suggests an awareness of contextual appropriateness but a lack of sustained practice in formal English environments.

#### 5. Motivation and Attitude toward English

Participants generally viewed English proficiency as essential for academic and professional success. Their motivation stemmed from the desire to perform well in presentations, interviews, and future careers. However, they highlighted limited speaking opportunities as a major barrier. One student commented,

“We study English in every semester, but we don’t get much chance to speak it. Most classes are focused on writing.”

This reflects an instructional imbalance that prioritizes written over spoken communication, hindering confidence and fluency.

#### 6. Influence of Classroom Environment and Peer Interaction



Most interviewees agreed that a supportive environment boosts confidence in speaking English. Collaborative tasks, friendly peers, and encouraging teachers were identified as positive influences. Conversely, a lack of participation opportunities or fear of making mistakes discouraged active speaking.

#### **4.4 CEFR-Based Evaluation**

Based on interview performance and CEFR descriptors, students' speaking proficiency levels ranged between **B1 (threshold)** and **B2 (upper intermediate)**. They were generally able to handle everyday interactions, express opinions on familiar topics, and communicate effectively in academic contexts with some hesitation. However, grammatical slips, limited vocabulary range, and occasional pronunciation difficulties prevented them from reaching higher proficiency levels (C1 or above).

#### **4.5 Interpretation of Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative results corroborate the quantitative data by confirming that most students demonstrate **intermediate English-speaking proficiency**. Both sets of findings reveal similar strengths and weaknesses:

**Strengths:** Comfort in speaking, clear pronunciation, and positive attitudes toward English learning.

**Weaknesses:** Limited fluency, lexical gaps, pronunciation inconsistencies, and communication anxiety.

These results highlight the need for a **communicative and interactive learning environment** where students can practice spontaneous speech, receive feedback, and overcome linguistic and psychological barriers.

#### **4.6 Summary**

The qualitative analysis provided deeper insight into the linguistic and affective factors influencing English-speaking proficiency among KUST undergraduates. Students exhibit functional English competence but require increased exposure, targeted speaking practice, and confidence-building strategies to reach higher CEFR proficiency levels.

### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Overview**

This chapter summarizes the research findings, presents conclusions, outlines the study's contributions, and proposes recommendations to improve English-speaking proficiency among undergraduate students at the Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST). The study aimed to assess students' proficiency levels, explore influencing factors, and suggest strategies for enhancement.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative data from 234 questionnaire responses and qualitative data from five in-depth interviews. Guided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the study evaluated students' speaking abilities against international standards.

Findings revealed that while students generally felt comfortable speaking English, challenges persisted in academic and spontaneous contexts due to language anxiety, limited exposure, and teacher-centered pedagogies. The study underscores the need for communicative teaching



practices and curriculum reforms to strengthen oral skills. This chapter summarizes these findings, draws conclusions, and provides recommendations for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers to improve speaking proficiency and align English education in Pakistan with global standards.

## 5.2 Summary of Findings

The research assessed students' English-speaking proficiency and identified key influencing factors:

1. **Comfort in Speaking:** 67% of students felt comfortable using English, though many lacked confidence in formal contexts such as presentations or discussions.
2. **Confidence in Expression:** 61% were confident expressing ideas, but 32% struggled in academic discussions.
3. **Participation:** 59% could engage in both academic and social discussions, yet 41% hesitated in unfamiliar situations.
4. **Grammar and Vocabulary:** 65% reported adequate control, but some faced issues with accuracy and word choice.
5. **Audience Adaptation:** 64% could adjust speech based on context, showing awareness of sociolinguistic competence.
6. **Communication with Native Speakers:** 62% were confident, though 30% struggled in fully English-speaking environments.
7. **Presentation Clarity:** 72% could express ideas clearly, but 24% required support in organization and fluency.
8. **Academic Vocabulary:** 67% were comfortable using academic terms, though 28% lacked confidence with complex topics.
9. **Pronunciation and Intonation:** 77% demonstrated clear pronunciation, while 18% required improvement.
10. **Influencing Factors:** Major barriers included language anxiety, limited real-life exposure, and teacher-centered pedagogies.

Overall, students displayed moderate proficiency but lacked fluency and confidence in academic and spontaneous communication.

## 5.3 Conclusions

The study concludes that most KUST students possess basic speaking skills but face obstacles in achieving higher fluency and spontaneity. Key conclusions include:

1. **Moderate Proficiency:** Students are comfortable in familiar contexts but struggle in formal academic communication.
2. **Psychological Barriers:** Anxiety and low confidence hinder oral performance, especially in public speaking.
3. **Limited Exposure:** Lack of real-world English use restricts fluency and interactional competence.
4. **Pedagogical Constraints:** Traditional, teacher-centered instruction neglects speaking practice.



5. **Need for Interactive Methods:** Task-Based and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can enhance fluency and confidence.
6. **Self-Perception Gap:** Students often overestimate their speaking abilities, indicating a need for reflective assessment.
7. **Sociocultural Influences:** Multilingualism and cultural norms affect students' willingness to speak and pronunciation patterns.
8. **Teacher Role:** Supportive, feedback-oriented teaching fosters participation and confidence.
9. **Use of Technology:** Digital tools can expand opportunities for authentic practice and reduce performance anxiety.
10. **Skill Gaps:** Persistent issues in vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation require focused interventions.

In sum, improving speaking proficiency requires addressing psychological, pedagogical, and contextual challenges through interactive and communicative teaching methods.

#### **5.4 Research Contributions**

This study contributes significantly to English Language Teaching (ELT) and higher education in Pakistan:

1. **Empirical Contribution:** Provides CEFR-based data on students' speaking proficiency at a Pakistani university.
2. **Identification of Influencing Factors:** Categorizes psychological, sociocultural, and pedagogical challenges affecting oral competence.
3. **Pedagogical Implications:** Recommends communicative, task-based, and learner-centered methodologies to strengthen speaking skills.
4. **Policy Relevance:** Calls for curriculum reforms, CEFR-aligned assessments, and teacher training in communicative pedagogy.
5. **Localized Insight:** Addresses the contextual realities of Pakistani higher education, filling a gap in ESL research.
6. **Learner Autonomy:** Promotes reflective and self-assessment practices for independent language development.
7. **Foundation for Future Research:** Establishes groundwork for intervention studies, longitudinal analysis, and technological integration in speaking instruction.

#### **5.5 Recommendations and Future Work**

To enhance English-speaking proficiency at KUST and similar institutions, the study recommends:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Integrate speaking-focused tasks (e.g., debates, discussions) across all levels.
2. **Task-Based Teaching:** Implement and evaluate Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for sustained fluency gains.
3. **Technology Integration:** Utilize online exchanges, podcasts, and mobile apps to provide authentic practice.
4. **Reducing Language Anxiety:** Introduce supportive, low-pressure speaking environments and mindfulness-based interventions.



5. **Peer Collaboration:** Encourage group activities and student-led presentations to boost confidence.
6. **Self-Assessment Tools:** Use CEFR-based checklists and reflective journals for self-monitoring and learner autonomy.
7. **Teacher Training:** Develop professional programs emphasizing communicative pedagogy and CEFR assessment.
8. **Longitudinal Studies:** Track language development throughout students' academic progression.
9. **Extracurricular Engagement:** Promote English clubs, debates, and storytelling events for informal practice.
10. **Sociocultural Awareness:** Explore multilingual influences and foster intercultural communication competence.

In conclusion, implementing communicative teaching methods, integrating CEFR standards, and fostering psychological and institutional support can significantly enhance students' English-speaking proficiency and align Pakistan's higher education with global linguistic standards.

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