



Title of Project:

Situating the Self: Identity and Power Relationships
in a Pakistani ESL Classroom

Researcher:

Rooh Ul Amin
University of Memphis
roohkhattak@gmail.com

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Sage Lambert Graham
University of Memphis
sgraham2@memphis.edu



Rooh Ul Amin

Project Summary

Key Findings

The context of this study is Pakistan, a country where English is considered as a source of empowerment (Rahman, 2007), but the practice of target language speaking is very rare in public schools (Capstick, 2011; Rahman, 2010). The present study primarily focuses on understanding the interrelationships of English language proficiency, participation in classroom discourses, and identities as situated social processes. Most importantly, how English as a second language (ESL) learners' prior schooling and English language learning experiences affect their academic endeavors and shapes the sphere of power relationships in classroom with reference to the symbolic domination of English and its invisible power in an ESL classroom.

Highly contrastive but parallel streams of education in Pakistan, that is public schools (Urdu-medium) and private schools (English-medium), contribute to the continuous perpetuation of educational disparities and economic and social stratifications (Shamim, 2011). Students' level of English language proficiency acquired through public schooling is extremely low and students neither have the ability to understand or write nor speak English, as teaching in public schools is solely delivered through the grammar-translation method. Students have access to cram course lessons from books containing solved exercises and prewritten essays that may help them in getting passing grades in the courses but never give them a chance to acquire a high level of proficiency in English (Andrabi et al., 2008; Khan & Kiefer, 2007; Rahman, 2010). This two stream educational system fosters both economic and social disparities in Pakistani society, which Shamim (2011) has termed "linguistic apartheid," and it needs to be addressed on priority basis.

The data for this study were collected through students' survey, classroom observations, and participant interviews in one of the public sector universities located in Islamabad Capital Territory in Pakistan. The study used a mixed-methods design, a thorough analysis of the data shows a strong relationship between students' prior school experiences, English language proficiency, participation in classroom discourses, and identities as situated social processes. Most importantly, students' prior knowledge of English or English language proficiency proved



to have significant affects on their confidence levels, participation, academic endeavors, and the sphere of power relationships in classroom discourses. Students' participatory patterns in classroom discourses were affected by their prior English language learning, and resulted in adopting either resistant or assimilation strategies for the negotiation of social identity and power relationships. The symbolic domination and invisible power of English in an ESL classroom was found to play a significant role in framing students' dispositions.

Agency, socialization, participation, and investment in an ESL classroom served as salient factors for the negotiation of identity and provided plausible explanations for a better understanding of the interrelationships of students' prior schooling and English language learning experiences, identity negotiation, and power relationships. In addition, the ESL classroom provided the researcher with new perspectives for interpreting learners' identity negotiation in their academic and social interactions with peers, teachers, and institutions. A thorough exploration of learners' perceptions on prior schooling and English language learning experiences provided clues for understanding how students cope with different academic and social challenges for effective learning in language classroom. Learners' perceptions were also important for theorizing the relationship between agency, identity, power relationships, and for understanding the importance of access to the imagined social networks.

Various aspects of students' participation patterns in classroom discourses were recorded—these discourses explain learners' roles, positions and positioning, and the construction of the social self. Within the Pakistani ESL classroom community (Lavé & Wenger, 1991; Norton, 2000), students are expected to demonstrate satisfactory level of English language proficiency based on the assumption that they have been studying English throughout their schooling. Moreover, students are expected to feel as if they are a homogenous group based on the perceived expectations that all of them will actively participate in classroom discussion based on the idea that there will be equal opportunities of speaking for all learners in the classroom.

Nevertheless, positions and positioning varied among participants hailing from different schooling backgrounds. Students from private schools were active participants, confident, advantaged, and leaders in the discussions while students from public schools positioned themselves as contributing less to classroom participation, having lower confidence levels, disadvantaged feelings, and following the dominant students' group. Students from public schools positioned their private school counterparts as competent English speakers, leaders in taking the initiative, and having advantaged schooling; at the same time, they positioned themselves as less competent speakers of English, following the competent students in discussions and having disadvantaged schooling compared to those coming from private schools. Students from urban public schools showed relatively higher participation in classroom discourse compared to those from rural public schools; nevertheless, they positioned themselves as disadvantaged. Students from private schools positioned their public schools counterparts as lacking confidence in speaking but having enough English language proficiency though when it comes to writing.

Learners encountered challenging situations in their prior schooling and in their classroom English language learning experiences; however, these challenges were also present in cross-group transitions where those experiences revealed their sense of (not) belonging to the classroom and the outside social world. Access to quality private schooling and enough opportunities to practice speaking the target language influenced students' participation patterns in classroom discourses, either positively or negatively depending on the access and training they



had in the target language. Students not only analyzed their own level of English language proficiency and participation in classroom discourses in terms of frequency but also juxtaposed these experiences with their peers who hailed from different schooling backgrounds, which resulted in varying power hierarchies.

Students who had more sociable attitudes had increased participation in classroom discussions and socialized more readily outside the classroom, which resulted in an increased sense of belonging and insider positioning. On the other hand, students with limited English language proficiency due to disadvantaged schooling participated less often in classroom discussions, which in most of the cases eclipsed the perception of themselves as positive *self*. Generally speaking, the findings of the present study supported the assertion that students' level of English language proficiency juxtaposed with other learners (Anderson, 2009; Cummins, 1996; Collier, 1995; Gee, 2000; Hakuta et al., 2000; Kayi-Aydar, 2014) and brings the question of equity, power, and social identity into play (Davies & Harré, 1990; Norton, 2000).

Based on students' self-reports it seems that in most of the cases the sense of deficiency in terms of language proficiency did not remain permanent. Nevertheless, all participants' previous schooling and English language learning experiences showed a strong correlation with their current classroom situation, academic success, and future life trajectories. Students' consciousness about the competencies gained via prior schooling significantly legitimized their positions and either consciously or unconsciously shaped their classroom participation patterns, self-confidence, social identity, and power relationships. With few exceptions, students with disadvantaged schooling appeared to be willing to move away from the feeling of deficiency to navigate their daily lives effectively, be empowered and gain individual autonomy in association with the world around them (Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 1999). To conclude, all the participants informing the present study successfully completed their studies; nevertheless, students from disadvantaged schooling expected challenges in the job market due to their limited exposure to English in schools. It is positive to mention here that unless the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1997) is distributed equitably through schooling systems, social class dynamics are there to stay and get strengthened day by day.

Implications

The present study has several instructional, policy, and pedagogical implications for English language learners, English language instructors, educational policy makers, and instructional materials designers. In line with previous studies (e.g., Harklau, 2000; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000), the present study demonstrates that investment in the target language should be encouraged, which in turn will lead to positive negotiations inside the classroom and nourish homogeneity with reference to the equitable access to language learning resources and opportunities. In order to increase students' level of participation in classroom discussions, learners should be assigned new and changing roles with different peers, which will help them construct new ways of participation and negotiate their self positively through individual growth and peer relationships (Lewis, 1997, 2009). Students who have a tendency toward less participation due to the limited opportunities they have had to practice in the target language will in this way take the responsibility for their own learning and exhaust opportunities for language learning, which in turn will help minimize the inequitable power relationships inside the classroom.



If we want students to succeed academically and develop enough linguistic skills for the social world outside the classroom, it is necessary for them to nourish cultural capital early in their schooling because nourishing linguistic skills in a graduate classroom could be too late for acquiring the desired level of proficiency in English. As power hierarchies cannot be overlooked in classroom settings (Reeves, 2006, 2009), the differences in instruction could be diagnosed and handled in a way that will help the ESL classroom instructors to accommodate the disadvantaged students. The present study found disparities in English language proficiency among students primarily affected by their prior schooling and language learning experiences. Hence, schools should avoid exclusionist-teaching practices and take serious steps towards accommodating the students who are disadvantages in a way that they fully integrate into the academic and social world of the school. Exclusionist syllabi should be discouraged in order to encourage students' socialization in schools and bring all students into the mainstream.

In addition, language planning and policy makers should plan for and support equity goals through teacher development programs that have the potential to produce a culture relevant shift in instructional pedagogies. Such practical steps will not only increase students' participation but also nourish improvement in academic accomplishments. Effective English language learning, therefore, necessitates the provision of enhanced opportunities for substantial exposure to the dominant language learning early in schools. Teaching linguistic knowledge alone is not sufficient to foster sound communicative pedagogy in a target language and to understand cultural delicacies. Curriculum and language materials, therefore, need to incorporate the essential information about the cultural values and norms of the target language and provide learners with the available opportunities to comprehend the sociolinguistic codes of the target language. The findings of the present study also reveal that ESL teachers should have the autonomy to adopt teaching methods that encourage oral communication and students' excessive participation in classroom discussions, which in turn will not only promote homogeneity in the ESL classrooms but also enhance students' sense of being an insider in classroom discourses. In this way, ESL teachers can work as facilitators in language learning in a manner that promotes students' autonomy and sense of belonging through lowering the affective filters.

In order to enhance individuals' capabilities through increased opportunities, language policies in education need to broaden the possibilities of access to language learning resources through language learners' increased socialization inside the schools. The policies should analyze the wider socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociolinguistic hierarchies in the society and come up with all encompassing curricula, that is, facilitating all students on equal basis. In addition, the participants in the present study demonstrate the highest level of dissatisfaction about public schools in terms of teaching and learning resources, teaching and teaching materials, therefore, need to be updated and made according to the needs of the day. Language policies in education should not follow the exclusionist approach; rather they should equalize the opportunities for learning across different schooling systems and through inclusive approaches (Pennycook, 1999, 2001). An inclusive approach to English learning and teaching will foster the acknowledgement of students' linguistic needs and will allow legitimate classroom membership to all the students.

It is worth mentioning that language policies in the Pakistani education system have been divided on the basis of language of instruction, that is, Urdu in public schools, and English in private schools. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses might shrink the inequitable distribution of English language learning resources and deficient students could be empowered to



some extent. Language policy practitioners should not conceive of the ESL classroom as the homogeneous whole; they should rather incorporate the social and sociolinguistic complexities that language learners bring into the ESL classroom from prior schooling histories and language learning, which are instrumental in shaping their identities and desired goals (Canagarajah, 1999; Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 2000). For this purpose, we, as teachers and researchers, should recognize the intricacies that are involved in teaching methods, learning strategies, and students' language proficiency. In the same vein, the present study highlights that exclusionist curricula needs to be discouraged and an integration of modern technological resources should be incorporated for competing in the global world. With the goal of Education for All (Government of Pakistan, 2014), and the importance of English language learning in Pakistan (Rahman, 2010), both private and public schools should follow uniform policies for insuring quality English instruction and equity in access to resources.

In addition to making a contribution to the existing literature on English language learning and teaching from a sociolinguistic perspective, the present study endeavored to understand relationship between English language proficiency, classroom participation, identity and power relationships and offer insights into the prior schooling and language learning experiences from the learners' perspectives. In this way, the present study suggests a way of making informed decisions to facilitate the successful academic and social life trajectories of students. By extending support and determining how the teaching of English could be made mandatory in Pakistani public school systems to compete with the counterpart English medium private schools. Moreover, how teacher training could lead ESL instructors to contemplate their teaching in a way that could positively contribute to students' real-life chances of academic and professional success through adopting learner-centered teaching approaches and encouraging equity.



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