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MULTILINGUALISM IN PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Multilingualism is a defining feature of Pakistan's linguistic landscape, yet the coexistence of regional languages, Urdu, and English creates both opportunities and challenges for education and social interaction. Despite the importance of multilingualism in Pakistani society, limited attention has been given to how language practices influence students' educational experiences, identity, and access to opportunities. This study examines the challenges and opportunities associated with multilingualism in Pakistan, with particular attention to the role of English alongside Urdu and regional languages. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to explore participants' language practices, educational experiences, and perceptions of multilingualism. The findings indicate that multilingualism can enhance communication, cultural awareness, and linguistic competence; however, unequal access to English, differences in educational resources, and the dominance of English in academic contexts can create barriers for some learners. The study also highlights the continuing importance of Urdu and regional languages in maintaining cultural identity and social connection. Overall, the findings suggest that multilingualism should be approached as a linguistic and educational resource rather than simply as a challenge. A more balanced language policy and greater support for multilingual education could help reduce linguistic inequalities while preserving Pakistan's linguistic diversity.

Keywords*: Education, English, Language Policy, Multilingualism, Pakistan, Regional Languages, Urdu*

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1. Introduction

In Pakistan, a student may speak one language at home, another in public, and yet be expected to learn and demonstrate academic knowledge in a third. This everyday movement between languages reflects the country's rich linguistic diversity, but it also raises an important question: does multilingualism create opportunities for learners, or can unequal language status turn it into an educational disadvantage? Pakistan's linguistic landscape includes numerous regional languages, Urdu as the national language, and English as an important language of formal education and professional communication (Shah, Riaz & Malik 2019; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah 2019; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah 2020). Although this diversity supports communication, cultural continuity, and social interaction, differences in the status and institutional support of these languages can shape learners' educational experiences.

Multilingualism involves more than the ability to use several languages; it also influences how individuals communicate, learn, and participate in different social contexts. Crystal (2003) associates multilingualism with cognitive flexibility and problem-solving abilities, suggesting that the use of multiple linguistic systems may offer cognitive benefits. In Pakistan, language choice is closely connected to context: regional languages are commonly used within families and communities; Urdu has a strong role in public communication, while English remains influential in education and professional settings. The social value attached to these languages can therefore affect learners' opportunities and participation.

The educational significance of multilingualism is particularly important. García (2009) describes translanguaging as a powerful mechanism for constructing understanding, including others, and mediating understanding across language groups. This perspective highlights the potential of learners' existing linguistic resources to support communication and understanding. Multilingualism also contributes to cultural identity because regional languages preserve traditions, histories, and community knowledge (Shah, Pillai & Sinayah 2020). Baker (2011) emphasizes the importance of language maintenance and bilingual education in supporting linguistic and cultural diversity. However, the cultural importance of regional languages does not always correspond to their educational or economic status.

Although previous scholarship has examined several dimensions of multilingualism, less attention has been given to how these dimensions interact within Pakistani educational and social contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how multilingual language practices influence learning, social relationships, and cultural identity. It argues that Pakistan's linguistic diversity can become a valuable educational and social resource when learners' linguistic repertoires are recognized and supported through more inclusive language practices.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How does multilingualism affect students' academic experiences in Pakistan's higher education contexts?
2. What challenges and opportunities do students experience as they navigate regional languages, Urdu, and English in academic settings?
3. What measures can higher education institutions adopt to address the challenges and harness the opportunities associated with multilingualism?

2. Literature Review

Multilingualism in higher education is more than the coexistence of several languages; it reflects the ways in which students use their linguistic resources to communicate, construct knowledge, and participate in academic life. Baker (2011) highlights the educational and communicative value of multilingual abilities, while García (2009) presents multilingual speakers as drawing on an interconnected linguistic repertoire rather than operating through completely separate languages. As García (2009) explains, translanguaging focuses on the observable practices of bilinguals rather than treating languages as completely separate systems. This perspective is particularly relevant to Pakistan, where students may move between regional languages, Urdu, and English according to different academic and social demands.

The Pakistani higher-education context, however, presents an unequal distribution of linguistic value. English is strongly associated with academic and professional advancement, whereas Urdu has a wider national function and regional languages remain closely connected with students' identities and everyday communication (Shah, Pillai & Sinayah 2019; Shah, 2018). Mansoor (2004), in a nationwide study of language and education in Pakistan, identified difficulties associated with English-medium education and the limited availability of educational resources in Urdu. Her findings also demonstrated differences in students' linguistic backgrounds and attitudes towards languages, suggesting that language practices in education are closely connected to wider questions of educational opportunity and social inequality.

The academic consequences of these linguistic differences can be significant. Students who have received much of their previous education through Urdu or regional languages may encounter difficulties with academic vocabulary, classroom participation, and written expression when they enter English-medium university programs. Such difficulties should not, however, be viewed simply as evidence of inadequate language ability. Cummins (2000) emphasizes the importance of learners' existing linguistic and cognitive resources in the development of additional languages. He argues that conceptual knowledge developed in one language can help make input in another language comprehensible. This suggests that students' knowledge of Urdu and regional languages

may support rather than hinder their development of academic English when educational practices allow meaningful connections between languages (Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2020; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2019).

Recent research on translanguaging provides further support for this position. Panezai, Channa, and Bibi (2023) echoing Shah, Pillai & Sinayah (2019) found that translanguaging in Pakistani university classrooms created interactional spaces in which teachers and students could develop and understand meaning more effectively. Their findings indicate that movement between languages can facilitate communication and encourage student engagement rather than necessarily weakening the role of English in academic learning (Magmmod, Shahe, Qureshi & Sultan, 2021). This challenges strictly monolingual approaches and suggests that students' complete linguistic repertoires can function as academic resources.

Nevertheless, multilingual practices do not automatically remove linguistic inequalities (Shah and Bashir, 2025). English continues to carry considerable academic and professional value, meaning that students with greater prior exposure to English may retain an advantage. Existing research also indicates that implementation of translanguaging can be constrained by institutional expectations and teachers' preparedness. Consequently, the challenge is not simply whether several languages are present in higher education, but whether institutions develop practices that enable students to use their linguistic resources productively while still acquiring the academic English required for higher education and professional contexts.

Although existing scholarship has examined language policy, English-medium instruction, and translanguaging in Pakistan, these dimensions have often been considered separately. Less attention has been given to students' experiences of navigating regional languages, Urdu, and English simultaneously, particularly in relation to both the challenges and opportunities that multilingualism creates within higher education. There is also a need to move beyond identifying linguistic difficulties towards considering practical institutional responses. The present study addresses this gap by examining how multilingualism shapes students' academic experiences, the challenges and opportunities they encounter across different linguistic contexts, and the measures higher education institutions can adopt to create more inclusive and linguistically responsive learning environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine the challenges and opportunities associated with multilingualism in Pakistan. This approach was appropriate because the study aimed to identify broader patterns in students' experiences while also exploring the personal experiences behind those patterns. Quantitative data

provided an overall picture of students' perceptions, whereas qualitative data allowed participants to describe their experiences in greater depth. Bringing these two forms of evidence together provided a more balanced understanding of multilingualism in educational, social, and cultural contexts.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study included 150 students who completed a structured questionnaire and 12 participants who took part in semi-structured interviews. The participants had experience of using more than one language in their everyday and educational lives. The questionnaire provided broader evidence of students' language practices, academic experiences, and perceptions of the benefits and challenges of multilingualism. The interviews complemented these responses by giving participants an opportunity to explain their experiences and perspectives in greater detail.

3.3. Data Collection

Two instruments were used for data collection: a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule. The questionnaire focused on students' use of different languages, their academic experiences, language-related challenges, and perceived benefits of multilingualism. It also considered the role of language in students' social relationships and cultural identity. The interviews explored similar areas but allowed participants greater freedom to discuss their experiences and raise issues that were not fully captured through the questionnaire.

3.4. Data Analysis

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, to identify the main patterns in participants' responses. The interview data were analyzed thematically. The responses were read carefully, recurring ideas were identified, and similar responses were grouped into broader themes. Participants' quotations were used to support the themes and ensure that the findings remained closely connected to their actual experiences. The quantitative and qualitative findings were then compared and integrated, allowing areas of agreement and difference to contribute to the overall interpretation of the research questions.

3.5. Validity, Reliability, and Triangulation

To strengthen the quality of the research, the questionnaire and interview questions were developed in line with the research questions and the key issues identified in the literature. Using two complementary forms of data also enabled methodological triangulation, as questionnaire findings could be compared with participants' interview accounts. This helped provide a fuller picture of the phenomenon and reduced reliance on a single source of evidence. The systematic organization and thematic analysis of interview responses further supported the credibility of the qualitative findings.

1.1. 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the nature of their participation before providing their responses. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were respected throughout the research process. No personally identifying information was included in the reporting of the findings, and the collected data were used solely for academic purposes. These measures helped ensure that participants' experiences were represented respectfully and responsibly.

3.6. Summary

Overall, the mixed-methods approach enabled the study to combine measurable evidence with participants' lived experiences. The use of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews provided complementary perspectives and helped develop a balanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in Pakistan.

3.7. Results

The findings are presented through three main themes that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data: language use patterns, educational impacts, and social and cultural dimensions. Quantitative data were obtained from questionnaires completed by 150 participants, while qualitative insights were drawn from 12 semi-structured interviews. The findings illustrate how multilingualism shapes language practices, educational experiences, and social and cultural interactions.

Theme 1: Language Use Patterns

The questionnaire findings show that participants used different languages according to the context in which communication took place. As shown in Table 1, regional languages were most commonly used at home (65%), while Urdu was reported by 25% of participants and English by 5%. In educational settings, English was the most frequently reported language (50%). In social and public settings, regional languages accounted for 45% of reported use, while Urdu accounted for 40% and English for 10%.

Context	Urdu (%)	English (%)	Regional Language (%)	Mixed (%)
Home	25	5	65	5
Educational settings	30	50	15	5
Social/Public	40	10	45	5

Table 1. Language Use by Context (N = 150)

The interview data further indicated that participants frequently shifted between languages depending on the situation. participant (P1) stated:

> "At home, I speak Pushto with my family, but at university, we mostly use Urdu and English. Switching between languages helps me explain myself better in different situations."

The qualitative coding identified three related subthemes: functional language switching, identity preservation, and linguistic adaptation. These codes indicate that participants used different languages for different communicative purposes across educational, family, and social contexts.

Theme 2: Educational Impacts

The questionnaire findings indicate that language was closely associated with participants' reported learning experiences. As presented in Table 2, 68% of participants agreed that they performed better when taught in their mother tongue, while 20% remained neutral and 12% disagreed. Similarly, 62% agreed that learning in a non-native language affected their grades, compared with 25% who were neutral and 13% who disagreed. At the same time, 74% agreed that multilingual skills helped them with academic tasks.

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I perform better when taught in my mother tongue.	68	20	12
Learning in a non-native language affects my grades.	62	25	13
Multilingual skills help me in academic tasks.	74	18	8

Table 2. Perceived Impact of Language on Learning (N = 150)

The interview findings provided further evidence of difficulties associated with learning through a non-native language. Participant (P3) explained:

"I struggle to understand science lessons because English is used and it is not my first language."

The interview responses were coded under the theme 'Instructional Difficulty', reflecting participants' descriptions of difficulties in understanding academic content when instruction was delivered in a language other than their first language.

Theme 3: Social and Cultural Dimensions

The qualitative findings also showed that multilingualism played a role in participants' social and cultural interactions. Participants described switching between languages as a way of communicating with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The interview data highlighted cultural connection, social interaction, and heritage preservation as important aspects of participants' multilingual experiences.

Participants reported that using different languages enabled them to maintain connections with their cultural and linguistic heritage while also interacting with wider

social networks. The qualitative coding therefore identified 'Cultural Connection' as a key code within this theme.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that multilingualism operates across several areas of participants' lives. The quantitative results show clear differences in language use across home, educational, and public contexts, while the interview findings provide evidence of language switching, educational challenges, and social and cultural connections.

3.8. Multilingualism and Social Integration

The qualitative findings also showed that multilingualism played an important role in participants' social relationships and everyday interactions. Participants described their ability to use different languages as a way of maintaining cultural connections while also adapting to wider social and academic environments. Participant (P5) explained:

> "Speaking Sindhi with my relatives and Urdu at college allows me to maintain my traditions while fitting into wider society."

This response illustrates how participants used different languages according to their social contexts. Regional languages were mainly associated with family, cultural traditions, and a sense of belonging, whereas Urdu was commonly used in broader social and educational settings.

Participants also reported that multilingualism enabled them to communicate with people from different linguistic backgrounds. As participant (P7) stated:

> "Being multilingual helps me make friends from different regions and understand their perspectives."

Overall, these responses indicate that multilingualism supported social interaction and cultural awareness among participants. Rather than viewing their languages as separate systems, participants described using them flexibly according to the people, settings, and purposes involved.

3.9. Language Hierarchies

Despite these benefits, participants also identified clear differences in the social and institutional value attached to different languages. English was strongly associated with social prestige and career advancement, while Urdu was linked more closely with national identity. Regional languages, although highly valued for cultural identity, were perceived as receiving comparatively limited institutional support.

Language	Social Prestige (%)	Career Advantage (%)	Cultural Identity (%)
English	80	75	20
Urdu	60	50	65

Regional languages	25	15	70

Table 3. Participants' Perceptions of Language Hierarchies (N = 150)

The quantitative findings demonstrate a clear pattern in participants' perceptions. English received the highest ratings for social prestige (80%) and career advantage (75%). Urdu was rated relatively highly for social prestige (60%) and career advantage (50%), while its association with cultural identity was stronger (65%). Regional languages received the lowest ratings for social prestige (25%) and career advantage (15%), but they were most strongly associated with cultural identity (70%). These findings suggest that participants distinguished between the practical value and cultural value of languages. English was perceived as particularly important for educational and professional opportunities, whereas regional languages were viewed primarily as a means of maintaining cultural identity. This difference highlights the unequal status attached to languages within participants' social and educational environments.

3.10. Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that multilingualism provided participants with important social and cultural benefits while also creating challenges within educational and institutional settings. Participants described multilingualism as a means of maintaining cultural identity, communicating across linguistic communities, and developing social relationships. At the same time, the findings revealed a clear language hierarchy in which English was associated more strongly with prestige and career opportunities, while regional languages were valued mainly for cultural identity. The quantitative and qualitative findings therefore point to a central tension within multilingual experiences in Pakistan: the languages perceived as most valuable for academic and professional advancement are not always the languages most closely associated with cultural identity.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that multilingualism in Pakistan is both a resource and a source of tension. Participants' experiences suggest that using more than one language can strengthen social interaction, cultural identity, and communication across different communities. At the same time, the findings show that languages do not hold equal social or institutional value. English was strongly associated with prestige and career opportunities, whereas regional languages were valued primarily for cultural identity. This contrast demonstrates that the experience of multilingualism is shaped not only by the number of languages individuals speak, but also by the status and functions assigned to those languages within society.

The findings support the view that multilingualism can provide social and cognitive advantages. Participants described how using different languages helped them communicate with people from different backgrounds, develop social relationships, and

understand perspectives beyond their immediate linguistic communities. This is consistent with the broader understanding of multilingualism discussed in the literature, particularly the argument that knowledge and use of multiple languages can contribute to cognitive flexibility and social interaction. However, the present findings also indicate that these potential benefits do not automatically translate into equal educational or professional opportunities. In other words, being multilingual may provide individuals with valuable linguistic resources while the wider educational system continues to privilege particular languages.

The strongest contrast emerged in participants' perceptions of language hierarchy. English received the highest ratings for social prestige and career advantage, while regional languages received the lowest ratings in these areas but the highest rating for cultural identity. This finding reflects the complex position of English in Pakistan. English provides access to higher education, employment, and professional mobility, yet its privileged position can create differences between learners who have greater access to English and those whose educational backgrounds provide fewer opportunities to develop proficiency. The findings therefore extend the discussion of linguistic inequality by showing that language choice is not simply a matter of individual preference; it is also connected to social and institutional opportunities.

The position of Urdu presents different but equally important patterns. Participants associated Urdu more strongly with national identity than with career advancement. This suggests that Urdu occupies an intermediate position within the linguistic hierarchy: it has considerable national and social significance, but it does not carry the same perceived professional value as English.

Regional languages occupy another position. Although participants reported that these languages were highly important for cultural identity, their comparatively low ratings for social prestige and career advantage suggest that cultural value and institutional value do not necessarily coincide. This distinction is particularly important in understanding multilingualism in Pakistan because a language can remain central to people's identity while simultaneously having limited visibility or support in formal institutions.

An important finding, therefore, is the coexistence of linguistic pride and linguistic inequality. Participants did not reject their regional languages; rather, they continued to associate them with family, traditions, and cultural belonging. At the same time, the perceived advantages of English encouraged a practical orientation towards the language of education and employment. This creates a situation in which individuals may value their linguistic heritage emotionally and culturally while prioritizing another language for educational and professional mobility. Such a pattern complicates the assumption that multilingualism is necessarily empowering. Its benefits depend partly on whether different

languages are given meaningful space and recognition within educational and institutional settings.

The findings also have implications for the concept of additive multilingualism discussed in the literature. Ideally, learning an additional language should expand an individual's linguistic repertoire without devaluing existing languages. However, participants' perceptions suggest that the Pakistani context does not always provide such a balanced environment. When one language is consistently associated with success and another mainly with cultural identity, multilingualism can become hierarchical rather than equally valued. This does not mean that English should be removed from education or professional life. Rather, the findings indicate the need to reconsider how English, Urdu, and regional languages can function alongside one another without placing the burden of linguistic inequality on individual learners.

The mixed-methods findings strengthen this interpretation. The questionnaire data provide a broader picture of participants' perceptions, while the interview responses illustrate how these perceptions are experienced in everyday social and educational contexts. The convergence between quantitative patterns and participants' accounts is particularly significant because it shows that the perceived hierarchy is not limited to abstract attitudes. Participants connected language directly with social relationships, cultural belonging, and future opportunities. At the same time, the qualitative responses demonstrate that participants actively negotiate this hierarchy by shifting between languages according to context. Multilingual speakers therefore appear not simply as passive recipients of language policies but as individuals who actively manage different linguistic identities and communicative needs.

These findings also point to an important limitation in treating multilingualism only as a linguistic or educational issue. The evidence suggests that language is closely connected with access, identity, and social mobility. A student may possess several languages and still experience disadvantage if the language valued by educational institutions is not the language in which they have had the greatest opportunities to learn. Similarly, maintaining a regional language may strengthen cultural identity without providing comparable academic or professional advantages. The central challenge is therefore the unequal distribution of value across languages.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study concludes that multilingualism in Pakistan should be understood as a complex social and educational reality rather than simply as the ability to speak several languages. The findings demonstrate that multilingualism can support social integration, cultural continuity, and communication across linguistic communities. However, these benefits exist alongside a clear hierarchy in which English is perceived as particularly

valuable for prestige and career advancement, Urdu as important for national identity, and regional languages as central to cultural identity but less valuable in institutional and professional contexts.

The central conclusion is that linguistic diversity and linguistic equality are not the same thing. Pakistan's multilingual population possesses considerable linguistic resources, but the value attached to those resources differs according to social and institutional context. The findings therefore suggest that a more balanced approach to multilingual education should recognize the practical importance of English while also protecting the educational and cultural space of Urdu and regional languages. Ultimately, the issue is not whether one language should replace another, but whether Pakistan's linguistic diversity can be supported without turning language choice into a marker of unequal opportunity.

A sustainable multilingual framework would allow learners to acquire languages that provide access to wider educational and professional opportunities while retaining meaningful connections with their home and regional languages. Such an approach would move beyond simply celebrating multilingualism and instead address the social conditions that determine which languages are valued, where they are used, and whose linguistic resources are recognized. This is essential if multilingualism is to function not only as a reflection of Pakistan's cultural diversity but also as a more equitable educational and social resource.

5.2. Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that Pakistan needs a more balanced approach to multilingual education in which English, Urdu, and regional languages are given appropriate and meaningful roles. The following recommendations are based on the challenges and opportunities identified through the quantitative and qualitative findings.

1. In the short term, educational institutions should provide greater support for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Teachers can use multilingual classroom practices, where appropriate, to explain difficult concepts and help students connect new academic knowledge with languages they already understand. Institutions should also encourage the use of regional languages in cultural activities, student societies, and other appropriate academic spaces. This would allow students to maintain their linguistic identities while developing proficiency in English and Urdu.

2. Teacher training should also be strengthened. Short professional-development programs can help teachers understand how multilingual learners use different languages during learning and how these linguistic resources can be used constructively rather than treated as barriers.

3. Universities can provide academic English support for students who need additional assistance, particularly in writing, presentations, and other forms of academic communication.

4. In the long term, policymakers should develop a more coherent multilingual education policy that recognizes the different functions of English, Urdu, and regional languages. English should continue to provide access to higher education and international opportunities, but its importance should not result in the marginalization of regional languages. Regional languages should receive greater institutional support through curriculum development, teaching materials, and opportunities for their use in appropriate educational and cultural contexts.

5. Higher education institutions should conduct regular assessments of students' linguistic needs and monitor whether language practices are creating unequal educational opportunities.

6. Further research should examine multilingual education across different provinces, educational levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds to determine whether the patterns identified in this study are shared more widely.

7. Overall, the aim should not be to replace one language with another. Instead, Pakistan's educational system should work towards a model in which English provides wider academic and professional access, Urdu maintains its national role, and regional languages continue to contribute to cultural identity and belonging. Such an approach would turn Pakistan's linguistic diversity into an educational resource while reducing the inequalities associated with language hierarchy.

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