A STUDY OF CHALLENGES FACED BY ESL TEACHERS IN TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS AT HIGHER SECONDARY LEVEL IN DISTRICT KARAK

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the challenges and strategies of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) speaking skills at the higher secondary level in District Karak, Pakistan. The study draws on observations and semi-structured interviews with 12 ESL teachers to explore their experiences and perspectives. The findings reveal a range of challenges faced by ESL teachers, such as students' fear of making mistakes, time constraints, diverse proficiency levels, limited exposure to English, and lack of engaging materials. It also identifies various strategies employed by ESL teachers to overcome these challenges, such as creating supportive environments, integrating technology, fostering cultural awareness, and pursuing professional development. The study highlights the key objectives of ESL speaking instruction, such as preparing students for globalized communication, applying speaking skills to real-world situations, and developing holistic language competence. The study also examines the methods and feedback strategies used by ESL teachers to assess speaking skills, such as one-on-one discussions, role-playing, debates, and technology-based tools. It emphasizes the importance of positive reinforcement, collaboration, creativity, and real-world relevance in providing feedback. The study concludes with recommendations from ESL teachers, such as incorporating team-building activities, leveraging technology for independent practice, and enhancing cultural awareness. These recommendations aim to create an enriching and supportive ESL learning environment that celebrates the diverse strengths of students. This research contributes to the field of ESL teaching by offering a nuanced understanding of challenges, strategies, and innovations in enhancing speaking skills at the higher secondary level in District Karak.

Key words: *ESL teachers, speaking skills, English Language Teaching, higher secondary level, District Karak*

Background of the Study

Language is a structured system of communication used to express thoughts, ideas, and emotions through sounds, symbols, or gestures. It is essential for social interaction and knowledge sharing (O'Grady, 2019). Given its centrality to human communication, every individual requires a language to convey meaning (Wibowo, 2014).

Among the world's many languages, English holds a unique status as a lingua franca, enabling global communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds (Zikmundová, 2016 and Afaq et al.,2023). Its widespread use in education, business, and international discourse underscores the importance of English language proficiency, especially in non-native contexts.

In this regard, teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at the higher secondary level is crucial for students' academic, social, and professional success. Among the core language skills, speaking remains a particularly vital yet challenging component for ESL learners (Brown, 2014). However, ESL teachers often face multiple barriers when teaching speaking skills effectively at this level.

One of the foremost challenges is limited exposure to English outside the classroom, particularly in environments where English is not the dominant language. This lack of real-world practice hinders fluency, reduces confidence, and restricts learners from applying classroom knowledge in authentic contexts (Al-Mahrooqi & Dennison, 2017; Hu & Li, 2020 and Gul et al.,2023(a)).

Large class sizes and time constraints further complicate instruction. With many

students to manage, teachers struggle to provide individualized feedback or adequate opportunities for interactive speaking activities (Huang & Chang, 2019; Karimi & Riasati, 2020).

Another persistent issue is the shortage of authentic and relevant materials. ESL instruction often lacks access to real-life resources—such as videos, audio clips, or conversational texts—that reflect students' lived experiences and interests. This disconnect may lead to disengagement and limit students' ability to relate language learning to real-world situations (Richards & Bohlke, 2019; Yin, 2019 and Gul et al.,2022).

Assessment of speaking skills also presents difficulties. Traditional written tests rarely capture communicative competence. Moreover, providing effective, individualized feedback requires time and resources often unavailable to teachers (Nguyen, 2016; Shumin, 2019).

Additionally, cultural and individual differences affect students' willingness and ability to participate in spoken English activities. Cultural norms may discourage open classroom interaction, while personal traits such as shyness can further inhibit oral performance (Karimi & Riasati, 2020).

Despite these challenges, several strategies can support the effective teaching of speaking skills. First, increasing students' exposure to English outside the classroom—through language clubs, exchange programs, or digital platforms—can promote authentic communication opportunities (Al-Mahrooqi & Dennison, 2017). Second, incorporating pair and group work, as well as task-based learning, encourages interaction and collaboration within classroom constraints (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, 2018 and Gul et al.,2023(b)).

To address the lack of materials, teachers can use online resources or create student-generated content like interviews or presentations, making lessons more engaging and relevant (Richards & Bohlke, 2019). In terms of assessment, performance-based evaluations—including role-plays, presentations, and peer feedback—offer more accurate measures of oral proficiency (Nguyen, 2016; Shumin, 2019 Ishtiaq et al.,2022).

Finally, fostering an inclusive classroom environment is essential. By valuing diversity and integrating culturally relevant content, teachers can help students feel confident expressing themselves and motivate them to develop their speaking skills further (Karimi & Riasati, 2020).

In summary, ESL teachers at the higher secondary level face considerable challenges in teaching speaking skills, including limited exposure, large class sizes, lack of resources, assessment constraints, and cultural barriers. Nevertheless, through innovative practices and supportive teaching strategies, these challenges can be addressed to enhance students' oral proficiency and overall language competence.

Statement of the Problem

In Karak, a southern district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, educational disparities persist despite institutional advancements. The district's overall literacy rate stands at 64.0%, with a stark gender gap: male literacy at 89.0% and female literacy at just 43.0% (Pakistan Almanac). These statistics reflect systemic inequities and highlight the challenges in delivering quality education, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

Teaching ESL speaking skills in Karak remains a pressing concern. Socioeconomic constraints and cultural norms restrict access to education and hinder language development, particularly for female students (UNESCO, 2016 and Khan et al.,2025).

In an increasingly globalized world, where English proficiency is essential for academic achievement and social mobility (Crystal, 2003), the demand for effective ESL instruction continues to rise.

However, several barriers hinder progress. Many ESL teachers in Karak lack specialized training in oral communication pedagogy (Richards, 2008). There is also a shortage of culturally relevant teaching materials, and instruction is often dominated by traditional, non-communicative methods (Nunan, 2003; Khan, 2020). Furthermore, cultural norms often discourage student participation—particularly among girls—further limiting their speaking practice and confidence (Ali & Ahmad, 2019).

Recent research underscores these issues. Abbas and Iqbal (2024) and Habib et al.,2024) point to the difficulty of implementing communicative teaching methods in rural areas due to resource limitations and sociocultural factors. Rahman et al. (2022) advocate for gender-sensitive strategies to improve ESL outcomes and promote inclusive language learning environments.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy, including teacher training tailored to local contexts, the development of relevant materials, communicative teaching approaches, and culturally responsive interventions. Without such efforts, the gap between the growing importance of English and the current state of speaking instruction will persist, limiting students' academic and professional opportunities.

Research Questions
- What are the specific challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level in District Karak?
- What strategies ESL teachers use to cope with the problems they face while teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level in district Karak?

Research Objectives
- To identify and analyze the specific challenges encountered by ESL teachers inteaching English speaking skills at the higher secondary level in district Karak.
- To identify the specific strategies, ESL teachers use to cope the problems they face while teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level in district Karak.

Significance of the Study
This study holds significance in enhancing ESL teaching practices and improving students' speaking skills in District Karak. By identifying challenges and effective strategies, it aims to support the professional development of ESL teachers and contribute to the creation of practical, context-sensitive teaching frameworks.

The research also explores how cultural norms and the local context shape ESL teachers' approaches, offering insights that can inform the development of culturally relevant pedagogies. Ultimately, the study seeks to improve English language education, strengthen student learning outcomes, and promote inclusive, communicative language instruction across the district.

Rationale of the Study
Proficient spoken English is a vital skill in today's globalized world, directly influencing academic and professional success (Smith, 2015). ESL teachers play a central role in developing this skill, yet teaching speaking involves complex

components—vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency—further shaped by sociocultural influences (Brown, 2017; García, 2011).

In District Karak, the local sociocultural and linguistic context presents distinct challenges for ESL instruction. This study draws on Sociolinguistics, Second Language Acquisition theories (Ellis, 2015; Larsen-Freeman, 2016), and language teaching frameworks (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) to analyze these challenges. By grounding the research in theory, the study seeks to develop contextually appropriate strategies that can enhance ESL teaching and better equip learners in Karak for participation in a globalized society.

Delimitations

This study is limited to ESL teachers in District Karak, specifically focusing on challenges faced in teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level. Cultural constraints restrict extended observation in female teachers' classrooms, resulting in shorter classroom visits. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a selected group of 12 teachers, including four female participants, to reflect cultural sensitivities while ensuring balanced representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Speaking Skills
Speaking skills are fundamental to effective communication and language proficiency, involving the clear, coherent oral expression of ideas (Brown & Yule, 1983). These skills enable learners to perform essential communicative functions such as expressing opinions, asking questions, and engaging in conversations. However, real-world application is hindered by various challenges, including learners' limited linguistic competence, classroom constraints, and insufficient exposure to English outside of school.

Components of Speaking Skills
Canale and Swain's (1980) framework identifies speaking competence as comprising linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic components. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) further expand this model by introducing discourse competence, which focuses on the coherent organization of ideas. While this theoretical framework offers valuable insights, its classroom application remains constrained in settings where learners lack access to authentic communicative opportunities. Moreover, the integration of technological literacy into speaking competence is an emerging area that warrants further exploration.

Role of Speaking Skills in Language Learning and Teaching
Speaking plays a central role in language acquisition, reflecting both linguistic knowledge and the ability to use language effectively in context (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 2003). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory advocates for interaction just beyond the learner's current level (Zone of Proximal Development), although excessive challenge can lead to demotivation. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis stresses the importance of comprehensible input, which is often lacking in under-resourced environments.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes task-based learning, supports speaking development but faces implementation barriers, especially in large, mixed-ability classes with limited teacher training (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Interactive tasks increase learner engagement (Skehan, 1998; Ur, 1996), but their effectiveness depends on students' motivation and prior exposure. Furthermore, Byram (1997) and the Council of Europe (2001) emphasize the role of intercultural

competence, which necessitates teachers' cultural awareness—a component frequently absent in teacher training.

ESL Teachers

ESL teachers facilitate English language acquisition for non-native speakers across diverse cultural and institutional contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). They often encounter systemic issues such as inadequate teaching materials, insufficient institutional support, and limited professional development opportunities. While CLT promotes student-centered, meaningful instruction (Celce-Murcia, 2001), large, heterogeneous classes often inhibit its effective implementation. Kramsch (1993) views teachers as cultural brokers, a role that adds further complexity to their already multifaceted responsibilities.

Role of ESL Teachers in Teaching Speaking Skills

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering supportive environments that encourage oral communication (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 2003). Integrating speaking tasks into instruction aids internalization of language (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Swain, 1985), but such efforts are often undermined by a lack of resources and training. Feedback is key to speaking development (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Ellis, 2008), yet providing it effectively in large classes is difficult, highlighting the need for scalable and sustainable feedback strategies.

Factors Influencing English Speaking Skills
Role of Peer Interaction

Peer interaction plays a vital role in enhancing speaking competence. Donato (1994) shows that collaborative learning—via group discussions, problem-solving, and pair work—offers students authentic opportunities to use language and build fluency. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development supports peer-assisted learning, where students gain confidence and language proficiency through guided collaboration.

Language Exchange Programs

Language exchange programs, including tandem learning and virtual exchanges, provide learners with exposure to real-world speaking contexts. Oxford (1997) highlights their role in developing linguistic and intercultural skills. Digital platforms like Tandem and HelloTalk further enhance access to native speakers, promoting speaking practice in non-threatening environments.

Teacher Feedback and Correction

Effective teacher feedback improves speaking accuracy and confidence (Ellis, 2008). Immediate feedback can hinder fluency, whereas delayed or strategic feedback—such as recasts or post-task reviews—supports both correction and confidence. Tailoring feedback methods to learner needs improves outcomes.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Diversity in ESL classrooms enriches learning but presents instructional challenges. Jenkins (2007) emphasizes that incorporating diverse cultural content enhances sociolinguistic competence. Kumaravadivelu's (2006) postmethod pedagogy advocates for leveraging learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds through flexible, inclusive teaching practices.

Limited Exposure to English Outside the Classroom
Brown (2014) notes that sociocultural contexts greatly influence language acquisition. Limited exposure to English beyond the classroom can impede progress. Community engagement, language immersion programs, and online interaction can help bridge this gap. Technology offers supplemental practice via media, forums, and language learning platforms.

Lack of Authentic Materials
Authentic materials—such as films, podcasts, news articles, and role-play scenarios—simulate real-life communication and expose students to varied linguistic forms (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Their use increases engagement and prepares students for practical usage beyond the classroom.

Classroom Management Issues
Managing speaking tasks in large or mixed-ability classes requires structured strategies. Harmer (2008) and Ur (1996) emphasize the importance of inclusive participation and risk-taking. Nation (2007) recommends strategic grouping and task rotation to ensure balanced participation and maximize learning opportunities.

Teacher Training, Assessment, and Technological Factors
Teacher Training and Professional Development
Ongoing professional development enhances teacher competence in pedagogical and technological domains (Freeman, 2016; Richards, 2013). Peer observations, workshops, and collaborative learning support instructional innovation and adaptability in diverse ESL contexts.

Assessment and Evaluation
Assessing speaking skills is complex due to the spontaneous nature of speech. Hughes (2002) and McNamara (2000) recommend varied assessment tools, including rubrics, self- and peer-assessments, and video-based evaluations. Formative assessment supports continuous improvement through regular, constructive feedback.

Technological Integration
Technology supports personalized, interactive learning. Multimedia tools, language apps, and AI-based programs enhance student engagement and autonomy (Chapelle, 2003; Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Teachers must develop digital literacy to effectively incorporate such tools into their teaching.

Technology and Blended Learning
Blended learning combines online and face-to-face instruction, offering flexibility and enriched interaction (Graham, 2006; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Gamified tasks, video conferencing, and virtual collaboration tools can make speaking practice more engaging and accessible.

Sociocultural and Contextual Influences on Speaking Skills
Influence of Sociocultural Factors
Sociocultural factors, as emphasized by Vygotsky (1978) and Kramsch (2018), influence language learning. Including culturally relevant materials and promoting cross-cultural activities fosters speaking development and global awareness.

Global Englishes and Pronunciation Challenges

Kachru (1992) and Jenkins (2015) highlight the significance of exposing learners to varied English accents and pronunciation patterns. Levis (2005) advocates for focused pronunciation instruction using drills and exercises to improve intelligibility, not necessarily native-like accuracy.

Sociolinguistic Competence and Interpersonal Skills

Developing sociolinguistic competence involves understanding registers, pragmatics, and discourse norms (Canale & Swain, 1980; Gumperz, 1982). Activities like debates, simulations, and collaborative projects promote interpersonal communication and pragmatic awareness.

Curricular Considerations and Language Policy

Curriculum design and national language policies significantly affect ESL instruction. Inclusive curricula incorporating project-based learning and diverse linguistic resources (Nation, 2009; Ricento, 2000) are essential. Teachers must align instructional practices with equitable language policies to support diverse learners.

Parental Involvement and Community Engagement

Parental and community involvement supports language learning beyond the classroom (Epstein, 2001; García, 2009). Initiatives such as parent-student workshops, language clubs, and cultural festivals foster a collaborative learning environment and reinforce speaking skills.

Professional Learning Communities and Collaborative Practices

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) promote reflective teaching and shared best practices (Vescio et al., 2008; Stoll et al., 2006). Collaboration among teachers through co-planning, peer observation, and professional dialogue leads to improved instruction and learner outcomes.

Teacher Well-being and Its Impact on ESL Teaching
Teacher Well-being and Burnout Prevention

Teacher well-being is closely linked to instructional quality. Maslach et al. (2001) and Kyriacou (2001) stress the need for supportive work environments, mindfulness practices, and effective workload management. Promoting well-being helps sustain motivation and improve classroom effectiveness.

Conclusion

This literature review has explored the complex interplay of pedagogical, sociocultural, technological, and institutional factors influencing the teaching of speaking skills in ESL contexts. It has highlighted the central role of ESL teachers, the importance of learner-centered strategies, and the need for inclusive, resource-rich environments. The reviewed literature provides a strong foundation for investigating the specific challenges faced by ESL teachers in District Karak and for proposing context-sensitive solutions aimed at enhancing speaking proficiency among higher secondary students.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching English speaking skills at the higher secondary level in

District Karak. A qualitative approach is deemed appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, teaching contexts, and the complexities involved in language instruction. To gain rich, contextual insights, the study employs two primary qualitative methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

The target population for this study comprises ESL teachers teaching at the higher secondary level in District Karak. These educators conduct special speaking skills classes two to three times per week to enhance students' oral proficiency. Although these sessions provide focused opportunities for speaking practice, they also contribute to an increased workload for the teachers, potentially affecting their instructional planning and classroom delivery.

Purposive sampling was used to select approximately twelve ESL teachers who have a minimum of three years of teaching experience at the higher secondary level. This criterion ensures that participants possess sufficient professional experience to reflect meaningfully on the challenges of teaching speaking skills. The sample size may be increased if additional participants are needed to reach data saturation.

To collect data, the researcher employed classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were used to capture real-time teaching practices, student engagement, and the challenges teachers face during instruction. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews allowed for deeper exploration of teachers' perceptions, difficulties, and the strategies they employ to overcome obstacles in teaching speaking skills.

The data collection process commenced after obtaining formal institutional approval and informed consent from all participants. Observations were conducted across twelve classrooms and focused on aspects such as teaching methodology, student interaction, and classroom management. Following the observations, semi-structured interviews lasting 25 to 30 minutes were conducted with each participant. These interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Ethical protocols, including maintaining participant confidentiality, ensuring voluntary participation, and allowing participants to withdraw or skip questions at any time, were rigorously followed throughout the study.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical approach involved a step-by-step process: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, developing and reviewing themes, and interpreting the findings in light of the research objectives. Thematic analysis enabled a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by ESL teachers and the contextual factors shaping their experiences.

This study contributes to the field both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enhances the understanding of ESL teaching challenges within the cultural and institutional context of District Karak. Practically, the findings may inform the development of more effective strategies for teaching speaking skills and support curriculum reforms that are contextually relevant and teacher-friendly.

DATA ANALYSIS
Observational data analysis
This study observed 12 ESL speaking skills classes at the higher secondary level in District Karak to understand instructional practices and challenges. The researcher adopted a participant observation approach and used detailed field notes to record classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, and teaching strategies.

Teaching Approaches

Most teachers adopted communicative, student-centered methods, emphasizing active participation. Clear instructions and interactive activities such as pair discussions, group tasks, and role-plays were frequently used to promote authentic language use and develop speaking skills.

Student Engagement

Student participation varied, influenced by class size and teaching techniques. In general, students engaged actively, shared personal experiences, and collaborated during tasks, although enthusiasm levels differed across classes.

Technology Use

Multimedia tools—videos, online resources, and audiovisual aids—were commonly used to support instruction. This enhanced engagement but also posed challenges related to inconsistent access and technical issues.

Classroom Dynamics

Teachers effectively managed large classes by using structured seating and interactive strategies to ensure inclusive participation. Despite challenges like noise and limited individual attention, efforts were made to maintain a supportive learning environment.

Observed Challenges

Key challenges included student reluctance to speak, managing crowded classrooms, and disparities in technology access. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrated adaptability and commitment to maintaining inclusive, effective instruction.

Summary

Observations highlighted teachers' resilience and use of student-centered strategies to overcome instructional barriers. Tailored approaches are recommended to address issues related to class size, technological limitations, and student participation to improve ESL speaking instruction at this level.

Data Analysis of Interview

This study explores the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level, along with the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The themes below emerged from the analysis of teacher interviews.

Large Class Size and Limited Speaking Opportunities

A predominant challenge identified is the large class size, which severely limits individual students' opportunities to practice speaking. Teachers reported that managing speaking activities in classes of 40 or more students is difficult, resulting in reduced speaking time for many students.

"In a class of 40 students, if I give just 3 minutes to each student for speaking practice and feedback, it takes up the entire period. This means other students do not get enough speaking time." – Teacher 9

Teachers also mentioned that limited speaking time impacts students' fluency and confidence, as many remain passive listeners during lessons.

Lack of Adequate Time for Speaking Practice

Besides large class sizes, teachers face the challenge of insufficient instructional time

dedicated specifically to speaking skills. Many reported that the curriculum and exam-oriented teaching leave little room for extended speaking practice.

"Speaking should be assessed regularly rather than just during final exams. However, with so many students and limited time, continuous assessment becomes difficult to manage." – Teacher 4

The limited time restricts teachers' ability to provide personalized feedback and meaningful speaking practice.

Code-Switching and Overuse of Native Language

A significant issue raised by almost all teachers was the frequent code-switching and over-reliance on students' native language during speaking activities. This habit hinders the development of fluency and confidence in English.

"Students often start a sentence in English but finish it in their native language. When they can't recall a word or phrase, they quickly switch back, making it hard for them to stay immersed in English conversations." – Teacher 1

The tendency to revert to the native language was especially noticeable during pair work and group discussions, where peer influence reinforces the habit.

"Whenever I assign group discussions, students begin in English, but within minutes, they switch back to their first language to explain concepts to one another. This defeats the purpose of practicing English." – Teacher 3

Teachers attributed this to students' comfort with their first language, fear of making mistakes, and social pressure to conform to peers.

Difficulty Enforcing English-Only Policies

Teachers described the challenge of enforcing strict English-only rules in classrooms. Many students resist speaking English, using their native language as a safety net or to avoid participation.

"I set a strict rule that students should speak only in English during class, but it's very difficult to enforce. The moment I stop monitoring; they go back to their native language." – Teacher 7

This creates a classroom culture where speaking English is often seen as unnecessary or even undesirable.

Impact on Fluency and Language Structure

Frequent code-switching not only limits practice time but also affects students' internalization of English grammar and sentence structures. Teachers observed that students who habitually switch languages tend to produce unnatural English sentences influenced by their native language syntax.

"Students think in their native language first and then try to translate their thoughts into English. This not only slows them down but also results in incorrect sentence structures." – Teacher 6

Such interference reduces spontaneity and naturalness in spoken English.

Challenges in Assessing Speaking Skills

Assessing speaking proficiency emerged as one of the most complex challenges. Teachers highlighted the subjective nature of evaluating fluency, pronunciation, coherence, and confidence, which makes grading inconsistent.

"Grading speaking skills is challenging because it is not just about correctness. A student might use perfect grammar but sound unnatural, while another might speak fluently but make many mistakes." – Teacher 3

The lack of standardized rubrics leads to varied expectations and confusion among students.

Providing Individualized Feedback in Large Classes

Due to large class sizes and limited time, providing timely and effective feedback to every student is difficult. Teachers often struggle to observe and correct speaking errors in real-time.

"I sometimes write feedback on common pronunciation or grammar errors, but students need immediate correction while speaking. By the time they read my feedback, they may not even remember the mistake they made." – Teacher 2

Many students do not receive the immediate input necessary to improve their speaking skills.

Lack of Technological Resources for Assessment

Teachers identified the absence of technological tools as a barrier to effective speaking assessment. Recording devices or speech recognition apps could facilitate better evaluation and feedback, but such resources are often unavailable.

"If we had access to recording devices or apps where students could submit speaking samples, we could assess them more effectively. Right now, we rely only on live assessments, which are time-limited and stressful for students." – Teacher 8

The availability of such tools would allow more flexible and detailed assessment.

Student Anxiety During Speaking Assessments

Many teachers noted that students often perform well in informal speaking but become nervous during formal assessments, which negatively affects their performance and leads to inaccurate grading.

"Some students freeze during oral exams. They can speak well during regular conversations, but when they know they are being assessed, they become nervous and struggle to express themselves." – Teacher 5

Anxiety management is therefore a critical factor in fair assessment.

Teachers' Need for Training on Speaking Assessment

Several teachers expressed a lack of sufficient training in evaluating speaking skills, noting that most professional development focuses on written assessments.

"Most of us were trained in assessing written exams, not spoken English. We need more workshops or guidelines on how to evaluate speaking skills fairly and consistently." – Teacher 12

Better training would improve consistency and the quality of feedback provided.

Discussion

One of the major challenges ESL teachers face in teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level in District Karak is the varying levels of speaking proficiency among students. As Teacher 9 pointed out, having both advanced and struggling learners in the same classroom complicates instructional planning. This diversity requires teachers to adopt differentiated strategies to meet individual learning needs. Tomlinson (2013) emphasized that addressing a wide range of proficiency levels in language classrooms is a known issue, particularly in speaking skills, which are highly individualized. To tackle this, ESL teachers in the study used a variety of adaptive strategies, such as peer support systems, simplified materials for beginners, and engaging advanced students with complex tasks. For instance, Teachers 1 and 2 implemented differentiated

instruction and peer learning, while Teacher 3 promoted learner autonomy through activity choices. Teacher 4 focused on personalized support through one-on-one interactions, and Teacher 5 integrated language learning apps to support self-paced practice. Teacher 6 emphasized flexibility, adjusting methods based on student response to sustain engagement.

Another key challenge is students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, which hampers natural language development. Teacher 10 observed that this lack of authentic practice affects students' ability to speak confidently and fluently. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis supports the view that regular exposure to real language use is vital for acquisition. Without this, students struggle to connect classroom learning to everyday situations. To address this, teachers recommended using authentic materials like movies and podcasts in lessons and promoting extracurricular activities such as language clubs and conversation groups (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). These efforts help extend learning beyond the classroom and provide meaningful opportunities for language use.

Traditional assessment practices also emerged as a barrier. Teacher 11 noted that regular written tests do not effectively capture students' speaking abilities or real-world communication skills. Brown (2003) similarly critiques such assessments, advocating for more performance-based alternatives. Teacher 12 emphasized the importance of creating a comfortable environment where students feel free to make mistakes, especially older learners. This teacher also stressed the need to tailor activities to students' preferences—an approach supported by Freeman (2000) and Nunan (1999), who advocate for learner-centered instruction that adapts to individual needs.

In summary, ESL teachers in District Karak face significant challenges in teaching speaking skills, including proficiency differences, limited language exposure, and ineffective assessment methods. However, the study highlights effective strategies teachers use to address these barriers—such as differentiation, peer support, technology integration, flexible instruction, and learner-centered environments. These approaches, combined with ongoing professional development, can empower teachers to improve speaking outcomes and provide more equitable language learning opportunities for all students.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching speaking skills at the higher secondary level in District Karak and the strategies they employed to overcome them. The findings aligned with the research objectives by identifying key challenges such as students' fear of making mistakes, limited instructional time, varied proficiency levels, and lack of contextually relevant materials—all of which negatively affect the teaching of speaking skills. In response, teachers adopted strategies including fostering supportive classroom environments, integrating technology, and using learner-centered activities to address diverse needs and promote communicative competence. The study emphasizes the value of flexible and personalized teaching approaches, highlighting the role of varied assessment techniques and constructive feedback in enhancing students' speaking proficiency. It also offers practical recommendations for educators and policymakers, such as creating inclusive learning environments, incorporating real-life relevance in materials, and addressing diverse learning styles through technology and differentiated instruction. Additionally, the study suggests future research to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies and to understand the factors guiding teachers' instructional decisions. Overall, the research contributes significantly to the ESL field by bridging a gap in literature and offering

practical insights. As Nelson Mandela said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." This study aims to support ESL educators in fostering meaningful, student-centered communication that resonates on both intellectual and emotional levels.

Recommendations

The teachers' insights provide valuable recommendations for addressing challenges and enhancing ESL students' speaking skills at the higher secondary level. Building a supportive environment through team-building activities and open communication fosters a sense of community among students (Teacher 1). To maximize engagement, the curriculum should emphasize the connection between language learning and real-world relevance, integrating practical scenarios and discussions on students' interests (Teachers 2, 5). Incorporating technology effectively is crucial, with speech recognition apps offering immediate feedback and interactive language-learning apps enhancing independent speaking practice (Teachers 2, 3). To encourage cultural awareness, discussions on customs and traditions from different countries should be integrated (Teacher 12). Addressing individual learning styles involves providing choices in speaking activities and adapting teaching methods based on students' preferences (Teachers 3, 6).

Boosting confidence and motivation is essential, with the recommendation to celebrate small victories and improvements in speaking skills (Teacher 8). Connecting speaking with other language skills can be achieved through collaborative projects and debates, fostering critical thinking, listening, and research abilities (Teachers 1, 3). Utilizing virtual platforms, such as Zoom for authentic conversations with native speakers and language exchange initiatives on social media, enhances real-world language practice (Teachers 1, 5). These recommendations collectively aim to create a more enriching and supportive ESL learning environment, addressing challenges while leveraging effective teaching strategies identified by the teachers at the higher secondary level.

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