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English as Opportunity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Policy in a Pakistani University

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Abstract
This work examines the language policy in a Pakistani university in relation to how English is constructed in the institution and how this language is constructed as an opportunity for students, with particular reference to the consequences of the language policy for non-native English speakers. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical framework, the research examines university's formal language policy documents with semi-structured interviews of faculty members and students. The results have shown that while English is seen as a vital instrument to success in academia and international professional opportunities, it also presents significant barriers to students who are not competent in the language. These students are difficult to have in class as they face academic challenges such as difficulty comprehending material read in class, conducting class discussions and other activities such as completing prescribed tasks. The study includes the need for more inclusive language policies with adequate language support for non-native English speakers. The research underlies the importance of reviewing language policies to enable all students to have equal possibilities to study, regardless of their linguistic background.

Keywords: English, Language Policy, Critical Discourse Analysis, University Of Pakistan, Pakistani Higher Education, Linguistic Inequality, English Medium, Social Mobility, Language Support.

1. Introduction

Language policy is a term used to describe the rules, principles and practices for the use and prioritizing of languages within an educational institution or society. In Pakistan, language policy was historically shaped by legacy of colonial power, national identity projects, and socio economic factors as well as factors defining access and outcome to education (Ali, 2025). English has a dominant position in Pakistan as an official, academic language, particularly in higher education, which is perceived to be an essential component in realizing opportunities by accessing the global world and socio economic mobility (Haidar & Manan, 2019a; Mehboob, 2025). The dominance of English is not just confined to the classroom but also in government, legal and public administration; yet reinforcing its place as a symbol of prestige and power (Rahman, 2023). The introduction of English in education during British colonial rule became the pattern that the elite institutions adopted English language as the dominant language of instruction while vernacular languages remained marginalized (Haidar & Manan, 2019a; Akhunzada, n.d.).

Despite its utility throughout the world, the favoring of English as a language of instruction in Pakistani universities faces the challenge of the students who belong to linguistically diverse backgrounds and may not have sufficient proficiency in English for their academic success (Mehboob, 2025). The dominance of English

has been associated to educational inequality, as non English speakers often complain of challenges of understanding lectures, engaging in academic discussions and completing academic assignments (Ullah, 2024). This suggests a tension between English as an opportunity and English as a gatekeeper which contributes to sociolinguistic stratification in Post colonial societies. Scholars propose that an inclusive approach taking into consideration regional languages and creating structured assistances for English language learners can result into better equitable outcome of learning (Mehboob, 2025; Ali, 2025).

1.1 Origin of the Study
This research is based on the identified lack of understanding of how language policy at Pakistani universities presents English as the means of opportunity but also contributes to the inequities in access and achievement. While research has been done on the macro level language policy and English medium instruction (EMI) in terms of Pakistan, there is a lack of research on the application of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the language policy texts and official rhetoric at the university level with the aim of troubling the ideological assumptions that are embedded in language policy texts. The use of CDA as the theoretical framework is taken due to the need for evaluating how language practices are instruments of power, which enunciate and contend with the reality in education and perpetuate socio linguistic hierarchies in educational institutions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem
The main problem that has been dealt with in this research is the paradoxical role played by English in Pakistani higher education. Although English is presented as a language of opportunity insofar as it paves the way to global academic networks and economic success, the dominance of English also builds barriers for students who arrive to their universities with limited English proficiency (Mehboob, 2025; Ullah, 2024). These barriers are reflected in academic profession differences and lower participation in forums of academic discourse and internships and research opportunities. The issue goes far beyond issues of academic struggle to broader issues of linguistic justice and social inclusion, and harmonious access to higher education. This study is an attempt to examine the ways that policy discourse supports English as opportunity but conceals the difficulties it presents for the students whose language background does not align with the dominant English language.

1.3 Research Questions
1. How is English represented as an opportunity in the language policy in a Pakistani university?
2. What are the perceived effects of the university's language policy on students who are not competent in English language?
3. How does the language policy and in connection with discourse relate to broader socio political dynamics in the educational landscape in Pakistan?

1.4 Research Objectives
1. To critically analyze the language policy of a Pakistani university and identify the how the English is rhetoric as an opportunity for the students.
2. To investigate student and faculty perceptions regarding the effects of language policy on the success and participation of students and faculty members.
3. To provide language policy of the University in a wider national debate and socio political context of language in education.

1.5 Significance of the Study
This research has contributed to the field of language policy and critical education studies by using critical discourse analysis framework for institutional language policies documents. Through this process of

identifying the ideological assumptions that underlie the rhetoric of policy, the work alludes to the powerful role that language plays in positioning issues of access, equity and social stratification in education. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, university leaders, and English language educators who make policy decisions to design more inclusive language policies to meet the needs of linguistically diverse students.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Language Policy and English Medium Instruction: Introduction
Language policies in educational settings have great implications for the access and success of students. In Pakistan, English has a position of power and dominance as the medium of instruction, especially in higher education, because of its historical and socio-political status as a symbol of power, status and economic opportunity (Rahman, 2023). Historically, English came to be known and used as a tool of governance during the British colonial era, and its legacy can still be seen on educational policies in post-colonial Pakistan (Haq, 2023). The trend of English medium instruction (EMI) in the Pakistani universities has been increasingly promoted particularly in the light of globalization wherein English language proficiency is considered essential for international communication as well as academic success (Suleman, Sadiq, & Shahnaz, 2025). However, EMI has brought into worry the issue of accessibility and inclusivity within the educational system, especially for students from a non-English speaking background (Mehboob, 2025).

2.2 The Function of English in the Higher Education of Pakistan
In Pakistan, English is considered not only as a means of academic education and instruction but also in order to access global networks and opportunities (Siddiqui, 2022). The growing use of English as the primary language of instruction in universities is indicative of the international tendency that English is accompanied by higher education, research and international mobility. Research by Akhundzada (n.d.) points out that English in universities in Pakistan is presented as a needed vehicle towards the global economic world, and as a result, educational outcomes are affected. The emphasis on English in the state has made it institutionalized in the state's higher education system, thus becoming necessary for achieving academic advancement and professionalism with career preferences in domains such as medicine, engineering and business (Rahman, 2023).

However, despite the seeming advantages, the overreliance on English is challenging for students who are not competent in the language. According to Ullah (2024), for the student from the rural area of the society or the underprivileged individuals in the society, the language barrier then becomes a major obstacle and this leads to an imbalance of opportunities for educational success and professional advancement.

2.3 Socio-political Implications of Language policy in Pakistan
Language policies in post-colonial societies such as Pakistan are neither neutral not situated in socio-political contexts that underscore the former power imbalances between the past. English has always been linked to the elite class and its dominance in education further reinforces social stratification (Suleman, 2025). In many ways English is a symbol of social prestige and a means of upward mobility, especially in the globalized economy. However, it also marginalizes those students who do not benefit from the same access to learn English language and specifically students from a low-income or rural background (Haq, 2023).

Mehboob (2025) adds that the dominance of English in the higher education system of Pakistan is a reflection of the global power structure in which English speaking nations dominate much of the global discourse, in sciences, politics and culture. This creates an education system that favors the English speakers and further deepens the divide of the elite and the marginalized in Pakistan. On the contrary, regional languages such as Pashto, Punjabi, and Sindhi with millions of speakers are ignored in favor of English and Urdu (Suleman, Sadiq, & Shahnaz, 2025). This linguistic hierarchy serves to reproduce socio-economic inequalities and requires non-English speakers to have reduced possibilities to access education and employment

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1484

opportunities.

2.4 The Linguistic Analysis Critique of Language Policy (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a major theoretical tool presented regarding understanding of how language policies function as mechanisms of power and social control. CDA enables researchers to look not only at the language of policy documents but also at the ideologies that influence these policies (Fairclough, 1995). Within the framework of Pakistan, CDA has been applied to examine English framer of opportunity and ideology of the language policy in the educational sphere. According to Ali Ammar et al. (2024), CDA emphasizes the fact that policies related to language are not simply technical, and they are very much ideological that will reinforce the power dynamics among the groups of people speaking other languages.

On focusing one's attention on the discourse on English-medium education, CDA reveals the ways in which language policies create the notion of "opportunity" for students, but at the same time exclude those students from that opportunity because they do not meet the linguistic criteria of success (Haq, 2023). The analysis of institutional documents, such as university policies and mission statements through CDA, helps to understand how the English language is being positioned as the key to success and how advantage is not taken into account for non-English language students (Suleman, Sadiq, & Shahnaz, 2025).

2.5 Educational Inequalities and Language Barrier

Educational inequalities in terms of language proficiency have been widely documented in the literature. Studies on EMI in Pakistan indicate that students who do not have a sufficient level of English proficiency are experiencing great difficulty in their academic learning and performance, such as difficulties in understanding the course material, participating in the discussions and assignment completion (Ullah, 2024). These challenges lead to poor performance in academic work, further restricting the possibilities for students to undertake internships, research works and build careers (Haq, 2023).

Moreover, inadequate mechanisms for supporting language in universities aggravate these problems. As noted by Haidar & Manan (2019a), it is observed that many universities in Pakistan do not provide an adequate amount of English language training or resources to their students who are non-native speakers hence leaving them at a disadvantage as compared to their peers who are English-proficient. This lack of support adds to a cycle of underachievement academically as students who are less proficient in English are unable to access the full range of opportunities available to them in their academic and professional fields (Mehboob, 2025).

2.6 English Influence on Student Performance & Participation

The effect of ELL on student performance is one of the hottest topics in EMI research. Research by Haidar & Manan (2019b) suggests that while English-medium education can improve academic potential of the students it can have detrimental effects to the students who are not proficient in English. Students who are not at ease in English tend to be alienated from academic discourse and this affects their participation in class and in group work and research projects. This alienation is especially significant in disciplines that involve much reading and writing in English, such as humanities and social sciences (Ullah, 2024).

Studies on student's experience with EMI suggest that while English can be an open door toward global opportunities, the language also presents the position to create a barrier to students from disadvantaged linguistic backgrounds (Siddiqui, 2022). As highlighted by Mehboob (2025), this dual role of English as an opportunity and a barrier need to be carefully studied into the context of education system in Pakistan to ensure that language policies do not produce inequalities inadvertently.

2.7 The Manifestation of Comprehensive Language Plans

A common theme to the literature is the need for more inclusive language policies in higher education. Researchers base a more balanced approach to language teaching, one that acknowledges that English is

important, but offer support for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds as well (Suleman, 2025). Ali (2025) recommends that universities should provide language support programs including English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that will help bridge the gap between the students existing language skills and the demands of English medium instruction.

Moreover, it has been argued that the promotion of multilingualism in universities can help to promote educational inclusivity. As all universities recognize the importance of regional language in addition to English, they can create an equal learning platform for students that acknowledges linguistic diversity (Mehboob, 2025). This would not only be beneficial to the students' academic performance but also in terms of social justice by ensuring that language is not a barrier to access and participation in higher education.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study is aimed at researching language policy of a Pakistani University with special reference to how English is framed as an opportunity in the language policy and what it means for students educational experience. The study makes use of qualitative research design and is embedded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) from which the theoretical and analytical lens of the study will be drawn through which the data will be interpreted. This chapter explains the research design, data collection methods, data analysis techniques and the theoretical framework for the research study.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), post-colonial theory and socio-cultural theory. CDA, which is discussed in chapter 2, is the major theoretical framework of this study which will allow for a critical analysis of the language policy and its ideology base. In the case of the language policy in higher education, by the use of CDA, this research attempts to show the power relationships embedded in the language policy at the university setting in particular the framing of English as the tool of upward mobility while rendering the practices of excluding students not proficient in English.

Post-colonial theory, most notably the work of Said (1978) and Spivak (1988) are other additional lenses that can be applied to the role of the English in perpetuating the legacies of colonialism in our higher education. In post-colonial habitual societies such as Pakistan, the on-going-power of the beak of English is a mechanism to help keep things exactly that: divide and practice the upper ethnic organization occupation hierarchy is strength that English-speaking (so the elite is more occupied with floor germimation can be treated as a quarter. This theoretical perspective assist to analyse the implications of language policies in terms of social justice, access and equity in higher education.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of language acquisition offers an information on how students belonging to different linguistic backgrounds are confronted with the challenges of learning in an English medium environment. According to Vygotsky, the acquisition of language is social and interactive and is influenced by the cultural and social context. This framework is useful to consider how the language skills and the educational success of students is affected by the social interactions and with whom and what they get from the university setting.

The fusion of these theoretical perspectives creates an overall framework to investigate the complexities of language policy taken into consideration within the Pakistani universities coupled with the impact of English on the academic experience of university students.

4. Data Analysis

Data for this study was collected using two main methodologies - document analysis of university language policy documents and semi-structured interviews of faculty and students. The document analysis was focused in the identification of discourses placing English as an opportunity and also looked for the underlying ideologies in the policy. Interviews with both faculty members and students went deeper into the personal

experiences and perceptions associated with the language policy and its consequences on their own academic and professional life.

Theme 4.1 Issue of Framing of English as Opportunity

One of the prevailing discourses in the language policy documents of the university in time is the construction of English as the key requirement for ensuring academic success and upward social mobility. The policy is clearly at the fovee of the realisation of the importance of English when accessing international research networks, the world job markets and the world academic resources. For example, English language proficiency is highlighted in the official guidelines of the university, which include the necessity to master English in order for students to engage in higher level academic activities such as publishing the results of their research, attending international conferences, and interacting with international institutions. The policy states:

"Proficiency in English is the key to either our students succeeding academically or professionally." "It opens the door for the international networks and opportunity for international employment, especially the disciplines of business, science and technology."

This guiding frames in relation to the view that English should be considered a key to succeed in the job and also to integrate in the world. Relevant to the larger dialogue of the place of English is the idea of the model minority taxation where English has been used as an opportunity to advance its position as the language gatekeeper to institutional success within the economic, academic, and professional spheres.

However, the implicit line of this discourse is also to draw it in as to who is competent in English and who is not. Stifling students without the same level of proficiency is an effect of the policy which makes English a prerequisite to success. Faculty members who were interviewed for this study also recognized this divide. One faculty member noted:

"Students who struggle with English tend to fall behind, especially those subjects which require them to do so much reading and writing in English. "Although English is an open, at the same time, it's an occlusion for people who are not fluent."

This statement describes a contradiction of the policy as English is both promoted as an opportunity and a barrier to students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Theme 4.2: Issues Encountered by Non-Native English Speakers

The second theme that arises from the analysis surrounds the problems that the students who are not proficient in English have. Both the document analysis and interview data show that non-native English speakers, in particular, often have difficulties in understanding course materials, when trying to participate in academic discourse, and when trying to complete assignments. Students who attended the interviews were inquired about their experiences with English teaching and their feeling of being supported by the university. Many students expressed that they struggle to follow lectures given in English especially in the early years of their academic career.

One student who participated in the business school explained:

"When I first started I had a difficult time understanding the textbooks, most of which were in English." The language barrier influenced my grades since I was unable to express my ideas as clearly as other people. "I wasn't sure of myself in the class because people talked and I wasn't sure how to respond in the class, especially people who were more fluent in English."

This feedback is in sync with the literature focusing on difficulties of non-native English speakers in the EMI contexts (Ullah, 2024). The lack of supporting structures in language makes these hardships worse as students are left trying to make their way in an English dominant academic environment without relevant language guidance and resources in place to uplift their language skills in any way.

A number of faculty members have also acknowledged these difficult issues, but highlighted the lack of resources for language support. One faculty person in the humanities was quoted:

"We know that a lot of our students are not very fluent in English when they arrive at university, and we don't have sufficient resources or we don't have enough structure, and programs, to help them improve their language skills." This lack of support makes it difficult for them to perform to their best."

The analysis indicates that regardless of identifying an opportunity in the policy in the form of English language, the university does not have adequate mechanisms to ensure that all students, particularly students who are not native English speakers, equally have access to this opportunity.

Theme 4.3: Perceptions about English as an Impediment and How This Affects Student Success

The third theme has us reminded of the perception of English as an opportunity and breach. While the faculty and students are clear that proficiency in English is important to academic success, many students also see English proficiency as a means of exclusion of students who do not know English well. Non-native speaking students of English often feel alienated and frustrated because they are unable to participate fully in course material and academic conversation. This sense of exclusion is also exacerbated by the lack of appropriate support systems to assist the student in developing better language abilities.

One student participant who was a senior student studying in the department of engineering explained:

"English is considered the language of success but it is difficult as a student like me, who did not grow up speaking English at home. I always feel like I'm playing catch up with my courses and I know it's impacting my likelihood in getting a good job once I graduate."

This sentiment was echoed by a number of students who felt because attention was focused on English there was an unfair advantage for students who came from more privileged English speaking backgrounds. The perceived inequity in the access to academic opportunities on the basis of language proficiency was a frequent theme raised throughout the interviews.

Theme 4.4: Structural Supports Organizational Backup and Learners Achievements

The last theme is concerned with the role of the institutional support to deal with the problems of the non-native speakers of English. While some of the students concussed that they like to have more language support programs, the faculty members brought to the table discussions of a lack of comprehensive language support structures within the university. Many students said that while they are being expected to strive at a high academic level in English, there were not many resources available to help them improve their language skills outside of normal coursework.

One faculty member remarked:

"The literacy policy of the University is expecting students to be fluent in English, but there's little in terms of the more formal language support." We expect student not to improve on their own, but not all students have the same linguistic background."

The interviews demonstrate a need for specific English language support programs such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that could be beneficial to close the gap for non-English proficient students. Providing more support and resources for non-native speakers would help ensure that English will be an opportunity for all students no matter what their linguistic background.

5. Findings

The results of the analysis of the language policy of the university and also interviews with faculty and students showed several features of the role of the English language in the academic environment. English is high profile in presenting it as an opportunity in the university's language policy. It is considered to be critical for academic success, participation in the global system and professional advancement. The policy places English as a gateway to global academic networks and career opportunities for students and emphasises the importance of English proficiency for students. This is in line with the overall discourse of English as a tool for upward social mobility and economic success (Rahman, 2023).

However, the results also suggest that English is a barrier for students that are not proficient in the language. Non-native speakers of English experience serious difficulties when it comes to understanding course material, taking part in academic discussions, and meeting assignments. These challenges often result in underachieving in school and feeling left out. Many students reported that their inability to do well in English impacted their grades and did not allow them to participate in internships and research (Ullah, 2024). The lack of adequate language support programs further adds to these challenges and students are left without sufficient resources to manage in an English-dominated school setting (Suleman 2025).

Faculty members also realized the challenges that face the non-native speakers but compensated for a lack of institutional supports in dealing with these challenges. While English language is considered important for achieving academic success, there aren't many official frameworks in place in order to help students improve on their language. This gap in support is yet another reinforcing mechanism in bringing about separation and separation of students who are English-sophisticated astronomical from English.

6. Discussion

The findings of this research maximally demonstrate the two-fold position of English in the context of Pakistani higher education, i.e. English is both an opportunity and a hindrance. Whilst the policy of the university which states that English is a tool for success - academically and professionally - this does create massive inequities for those who are not proficient in the language. This conespits with this wider literature on English-medium instCrution (EMI) in post colony societies, where English is sometimes located as a key to global going and upward mobility (Siddiqui, 2022). However, the problems in connection with the non-Native English speakers struggle to access these opportunities tend to influence the policy limitations to address the language diversity and foster the educational equality (Suleman, Sadiq, & Shahnaz, 2025).

The study also emphasizes the role played by the language policy in the university in perpetuating socio economic divides. English is also a form of linguistic capital, which provides a privileged access to the academic opportunities as well as the networks throughout the world, thus benefitting students who enjoy benefits of English language advantages. This is similar to what Bourdieu (1991) said of language being a social power that could be opted to continue inequality. This divide is only increased by the lack of proper language support programs, which results in non-native speakers being disadvantaged in terms of underachievement in school work and in terms of prospects of careers (Haq, 2023).

In addition, what the results show is that the way in which the university has managed the issue of language policy reflects more general post-colonial dynamics. As highlighted by Said (1978), the dominance of the English language in the post colonial societies is still a function to continue the legacies of colonialism and the power of the German language elite. In Pakistan, the prioritization of the English language in higher education education can be seen as an extension of this process of cultural and linguistic dominance and has

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marginalized students who speak regional languages (Rahman, 2023).

The findings also point to a need to have more inclusive policies relating to language recognition and ensure that enough resources were provided to students from a diverse language background. While English is still an important instrument for academic and professional success, the university needs to add more, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs, to secure equal access to opportunity for all students. This would help to level the playing field and reduce the inequities that have been created by the dominance of the English language in higher education (Mehboob, 2025).

7. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the language policy in a Pakistani university by focusing on the way English is seen as an opportunity and its implications for the academic experience of students. The results show that, although English is seen as holding the keys for success, because it is so dominant, it poses significant barriers for students who have little or no competency in the language. These barriers constrain students from academic performance, social participation and access to opportunities, which perpetuates the existing inequality within the education system.

The study also calls for more inclusion of those students that are facing language issues by having policies in languages. The language policy of the university needs to be revised to include the establishment of structured language support programs to assist non-native speakers of English to enhance language proficiency. By doing so requires that the university guarantee that English is not an opportunity for the few, but for all students regardless of their linguistic background. Furthermore, the study recommends for more recognition of regional languages to be included in the language policy of the university in order to foster linguistic diversity and social inclusion.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the idea of suspiciously viewing the language policies which adorn in upper schooling towards understanding the implications with respect to the capacity of students to acquire possibilities as well as social mobility. By handling the problems of non-native speakers of English, universities can establish a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that provides equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their language level.

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