EXPLORING CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPING ADVANCED SPEAKING PROFICIENCY AT KOHAT UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: THE ROLE OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract
This research is designed to explore the general speaking challenges to developing advanced speaking proficiency of high qualified language users, with the special focus on the role of idiomatic expressions in advances spoken language proficiency at Kohat University of Science and Technology(KUST),Kohat, KP,Pakistan . The study discusses the barriers that kept high qualified language users away from using idioms in their communication. Correspondingly, this research is purely qualitative and exploratory in nature. The study includes those high qualified language users as participants, who have taken IELTS and are done with their doctoral studies Total 10 participants selected for the study from numerous disciplines of Kohat University of Science and Technology. Under purposive sampling technique the relevant participants were selected for the deeper insights about the difficulties faces by high qualified language users at (KUST). Accordingly, semi-structured interviews are designed to gather detail information/data from the respondents. The audio recorded interviews were then transcribed and analyzed via Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic content analysis framework. The labeled data is categorized into codes for grounded themes. The findings of the study suggest that even the highly qualified language users are unaware of the standardized criteria set by IELTS, for reaching advanced spoken proficiency. The knowledge of the descriptor is necessary for knowing the strength and weakness of different levels of spoken proficiency. Likewise, the results indicate that the overemphasis on the foundational knowledge and traditional methods of teaching language need to replace by modern classroom and communication skills. Furthermore, future research can further explore the frequency and the evaluation of practical implications of modern methodologies in language classrooms.
Keywords/Phrases: Spoken Language Proficiency; Idiomatic Expressions; Speaking Skills; Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), Qualified Language Use.

1. Introduction

Language is a vital tool of communication, encompasses four major skills i.e., listening, speaking reading and writing. Each skill covered various levels, under which advanced level is considered proficient and most demanding one while reaching to advanced spoken proficiency required certain components of the language to be adapted in communication. This requires developing commutative competence by not focusing only linguistic aspects of a language but also to develop the cultural understanding of the language. As Glucksberg (2002), mentioned that idioms are the best source to know about target language. The cultural understanding is

developing by exposing to the culturally rich expressions of any language because it conveys the hidden values and also history of a certain group of people. These expressions are necessary for a fluent, hesitation free, and an articulate communication which help in attaining native like spoken proficiency (Liu, 2017).

Considering the fact that native speakers do use idiomatic expression in their communication naturally and accurately but non- native speakers are unaware of this special nature of idioms by considering them a hurdle to developing advanced speaking skills. Their main focus usually center on linguistic mastery and grammatical accuracy which limit their commutative scope of language. With the mastery of grammatical and syntactic structure, non-natives speakers need to use some fixed expressions, commonly known as idioms and proverbs for developing native like spoken proficiency (Akbarain, 2012). This in turn impacts their spoken proficiency by not performing up to the level which is usually expected of highly qualified language users in Pakistan. Furthermore, the mastery of idiomatic expressions is one of the significant measures in standardized language proficiency tests such as IELTS.

Numerous studies in the Pakistani context, have extensively conducted on difficulties faces by non-native language users in Pakistan at various levels. Likewise some barriers as identified by Pakistani scholars such as (Younas et al., 2020; Ali et al. 2020; Basir et al., 2011) pointing pedagogical differences, linguistics inaccuracies and psychological barriers, impacting spoken language proficiency. Keeping in view the above research studies, spoken language barriers are explored at secondary and undergraduate levels. Research on the difficulties faces by high qualified language users at Kohat University of Science and Technology at achieving advanced spoken proficiency is underexplored and this paper is design to fill this gap.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Existing literature in the Pakistani context has already explored the challenges in developing language speaking skills among secondary and undergraduate learners. However, this problem is not only limited to undergraduate level. Although, at higher levels of education the skills of language are often more developed, there is still room for improvement. As Khan et al, (2023) has pointed out the presence of speaking problems among postgraduate students due to various reasons. Rehman et al, (2023b) in their recent study argue that doctoral students also face language difficulties. This could be because at the higher education level the expectations of language skills also increase, and it is very difficult to achieve advanced level language proficiency even after getting higher educational degrees. The above studies predominantly are underexplored in this regard.

According to IELTS (n.d.) a candidate who uses idiomatic expressions naturally and appropriately is most likely considered an advanced speaker with an advanced band score of 7 or above. Similarly, the majority of the graduate and PhD students, despite their strong foundational knowledge of grammar and lexicon often struggle to achieve an advanced band score of 7 or above 7. Pakistani learners face problems in the use of idiomatic expressions (Akhtar & Qureshi, 2020). A primary reason for this deficit is the inadequacy to use idiomatic expression in their spoken language. Therefore, the present study investigates the barriers and difficulties that even highly qualified language users face while using idiomatic expressions.

1.2 Research Questions

> ➢ What are the reasons that highly qualified language users (graduate/PhD) at Kohat University of Science and Technology, identify as barriers for achieving advanced spoken proficiency?

➢ What factors do the respondents identify as reasons causing difficulties in developing idiomatic language proficiency?

1.3 Research Objectives

➢ To identify the reasons that causes barriers to advanced spoken proficiency of qualified language users at Kohat University of Science and Technology.
➢ To identify the factors that affect idiomatic language proficiency of the respondents.

1.4 Significance of the Possible Outcomes

Focusing specifically on the idiomatic competence as a barrier to advanced spoken proficiency, this study explores the challenges that highly qualified language users face while using idiomatic expressions for reaching advanced or near- native spoken proficiency. The findings suggest some of the actionable strategies for learning and using idioms effectively to enhance spoken language proficiency. The study benefits scholars at KUST in particular and curriculum designers in general and language teachers as well. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of idiomatic competence for advanced spoken proficiency in standardized language proficiency tests, i.e., IELTS.

2. Literature Review

According to Aghbart et al. (2016) idioms are those expressions in any language that are fixed and whose meaning cannot easily infer from the individual constitutes. He suggested that for enriching spoken proficiency and cultural understanding idioms plays a pivotal role. These short and meaningful units are different from proverbs which embedded wisdom, truth and traditions itself. Using idioms correctly and naturally contributes to the spoken language proficiency.

Baker (2018) in her book, "In Other Words" extended the definition of idioms by stating that idioms are frozen in nature with minor changes to be allowed in their form but its meaning cannot be inferred directly from its constituents. Additionally, it has been remain colorful and fascinating expressions for linguists and for the researcher due to its figurative and contextual meaning. Thus these expressions add creativity and variety into the spoken communication.

According to Zarens (2022), idioms serve spoken language skills by making the utterance more vivid and fluent. In spoken communication it serves multiple functions including expressing emotions, regulating social contact, describing real life happening and conveying formal message. Besides this, using idioms in communication can enhance spoken skills because it's the contextual use of language. In the same way it enables speakers to convey meaning effectively and accurately. As idioms embedded cultural understanding it helps learner to communicate in diverse contexts, hence connect speakers and also helps interpreting the meaning more clearly.

Fitriati and Wahyuni (2018), defines idioms as lexical bundles that improve spoken language. These multifaceted expressions convey a lot of information in few words but its heavily dependent on situational, therefore it's the situational expressions and shapes context. That's why these expressions influence and is influenced by the context in which they occur. These lexical bundles prove to be most utilitarian in improving speaking language proficiency.

According to Wahyuningtyas (2021), a key indicator to language user spoken proficiency is the use of idiomatic expressions. These expressions are proven to be the most effective tool of advanced communication particularly for higher studies learners. The nuance nature of these expressions helps learner to convey their complex ideas concisely, via lexical chunks that results in more advanced and effective communication. Hence the use of idioms needs to be encouraged in advanced academic contexts. However, its systematic adaptation into higher education curriculum is yet limited.

Idioms are importance linguistic unit, enhancing language user's communicative performance. Adam (2015) and (Nigar et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2025) elaborated on the importance of idioms in enhancing communicative competence, necessary for improving students' performance in spoken communication. His study suggests that by utilizing idiomatic expressions in communication, learners need to inculcate them in communication. This can be achieved by effective teaching of idioms, thus this factor proven as an indicator for enhances spoken skills.

Multiple researches have extensively explored the speaking challenges facing by Pakistani language learners at various levels. In the light of the work of Al Nakhalah (2016) and Amoah and Yeboath (2021), it has been discovered that Pakistani language users came across comprehension problem while using culturally rich expressions, vocabulary deficiency, and grammar related problems in their speaking skills. These challenges affect their overall language proficiency.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the challenges in using and understanding idioms, mainly in Pakistani context. In the line with this emphasis, research by Noreen & Zafar (2016) demonstrates that, Pakistani language user's at all educational levels often struggle with the comprehension and using idiomatic expressions. Multiple causes could be the reasons for these challenges including translation, contextual meaning and lack of authentic exposure.

Reviewing the previous studies on using idioms to advances spoken proficiency, identifies a knowledge vacuum about the complex challenges faced by highly qualified language users at KUST. Although idioms are studied by various Pakistani authors along the difficulties faces by language users, this factor has not particularly examined with reference to highly qualified language users where this gap is noticeable. As a result the difficulties this particular group faces while reaching advanced spoken proficiency but idiomatic competence is still underexplored offering an explicit gap for this study.

3. Research Methodology
This section deals with the methods and procedure used while carrying out this research study.

3.1 Research Design
Following the nature of the proposed study that intends to identify the factor which most of the highly qualified language users at Kohat University of science and technology recognizes for the lack of idiomatic competence, therefore the study carries a qualitative research design for the in-depth understanding of the specific context (Flick, 2014).

3.2 Population
All highly qualified language users are taken as sample for this study. The term highly qualified referred to those who have done their PhDs or graduate studies. The reason behind the selection is that these highly qualified language users explain in detail their lively prolonged language learning journey and the challenges they encountered.

3.3 Sampling
Initially 5 participants were chosen through purposive sampling technique as suggested by Patton (2015) that this technique best fit to target specific participants having specification related to the study. The other 5 participants were referred by the initial participant of the same academic zone through snowball sampling technique.

3.4 Procedures for the Data Collection
The research design followed the semi structured interview technique for data collection. A semi structured interview as claim by Cohen & Arieli (2011) is one of the vital qualitative tool for collecting qualitative data. Single interview protocol was an instrument, containing two sections

with the open ended questions. The first part of the questionnaire is to answer first research question while the second part was in the correspondence with second research question objectives. The interviews were documented in audio recorded form, which was converted to written form for the analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The study followed a qualitative framework using interview as data collection tool. The recorded interviews were converted into written text for the labeling of the meaningful units. These meaningful units were then grouped into specific categories for generating broader themes under reoccurring patterns.

3.5.1 Analysis and Discussion

3.5.2 Analysis of Research Question No. 1

For the analysis of research question no. 1 the findings reveal multiple interconnected factors discuss below:

3.5.3 Lack of Awareness of the Standardized Criterion

Upon the analysis of the interview transcript, that reveals that highly qualified language users at KUST lack awareness on international standards such as IELTS. Without knowing the official criteria for advanced proficiency resulted in often lacking or incomplete definitions. Some stresses pronunciation and other focuses only on the grammar, instead of focusing on all aspects collectively. This resulted in misalignment between criteria, consequently high qualified language users remain faces difficulties to reached advanced level spoken proficiency. The problem deeply rooted in the context of KUST due to local environment, lack of appropriate teaching methods and feedbacks, and psychological and sociocultural factor**.**

3.5.4 Local University Environment

The predominance of Pashto speaking environment makes the advanced communication difficult and unfavorable to practice. This is quantify by Mathew as, "99% are speaking in Pashtu." The reason lies in the fact that they are from rural areas and they have done their education from local schools and colleges. Their language skills were not focused in their schools and colleges and even in the context of KUST they speak in Pashtu. Moreover people relate advanced spoken proficiency with specific domain such as English department resulted in the absence of daily practice and interactive communication among faculty and students at KUST. The environment at KUST demonstrates that highly qualified language users even at the university level have no one and nowhere to practice, impacting their advanced spoken proficiency.

3.5.5 Lack of Feedback

The results demonstrate that the respondent's awareness on the complex nature of spoken proficiency is lacking. The reason behind the lack of awareness is the lack of systematic, and criterion feedback in their schools and language classrooms in the university. Consequently, language users create and use inappropriate criteria for advanced spoken proficiency. Instead of interpreting advanced spoken proficiency being collective use of all competencies including vocabulary, grammar, and sounds, they associate it with the mastery of any discrete linguistic element. This resulted in a gap between the actual and inappropriate criteria by normalizing the created criteria.

3.5.6 Weak Foundational Education

The analysis of the information shows that there are systematic problems in the language teaching due to which qualified language users faces difficulties in achieving advanced spoken proficiency. All the respondents reported that prevailing teaching methods are rooted in rote

memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules, which leads to lack of practical application. The retained grammatical rules are useful only for the examination purposes but never transfer to spontaneous communication. This resulted in the fundamental struggles in the formation of basic sentence structure of tenses, direct indirect and narration during real world communication.

Lack of Opportunities

The data shows a significant deficit in rich and authentic input learning environment. The deficiency arises from the respondent's early education in rural areas with limited resources. The problem persists into their higher education in the KUST. The participants described language classrooms as insufficient and lacked technological integration to support meaningful input and notable output. Due to the lack of conducive and resourceful environment even the qualified language users have little or no exposure to advanced communication. This resulted in a significant challenge for reaching native like spoken proficiency.

Inappropriate Teaching Methods

The analysis illustrates that throughout the respondent's educational journey they were relying on the traditional pedagogical approach (GTM) for teaching and learning language. This approach fundamentally prioritizes translation of written text and memorization of fixed rules for the development of spoken proficiency. This gradually decreases their spoken proficiency, demonstrating a clear gap between declarative (the knowledge of rules) and procedural knowledge (the knowledge of use of the language). Participants contribute this limitation with the decrease in their spoken proficiency skills and poor pronunciation.

3.5.7 Psychological and Social Barriers

Fear of Losing Status

The data confirms that noticeable affective barriers present even at higher level of education resulted in obvious anxiety and fear of negative feedback. The responses demonstrates that a greater sense of status consciousness in academic hierarchy contribute to this anxiety as faculty and scholars view grammatical and linguistic mistakes a threat to their intellectual credibility rather than a part of language learning journey. In order to minimize this perceived danger of to professional identity, people limit their spoken interaction in public in order to not appear "foolish" or being misunderstood.

Over Accuracy in Spoken Communication

The data identify prevailing judgmental culture of linguistic accuracies, resulted in lack of spoken interactive practices. All the participants observed intense self-monitoring communication. This could be due to the fact that people negatively evaluated each other in social interaction. This reflects the lack of systematic supportive and motivation from the institute resulted in informal and local interaction during classrooms and meetings. The local environment makes them feel comfortable and less tensed, which gradually weaken their advanced spoken proficiency.

4.1 Discussions

The study examined spoken language proficiency challenges among highly qualified language users at KUST. The results demonstrates that the root cause of difficulties emerges not due to the individual linguistic deficiency, rather its resulted from an intricate combination of environmental, psychological, pedagogical, and systematic factors. The untreated systematic and psychological flaws are impacting their advanced communication even at the higher level of education. The results of the study show similarity with the existing literature.

One of the prominent environment barrier as identified by respondents of the present study is the overwhelming use of local language (Pashtu) in the social and professional setting of KUST as quoted by Mr. Ahmad *(99% are talking in Pashtu)*. The limited opportunity of practicing advanced speaking is reported by every participant. The findings relate to earlier literature demonstrating significant gap in communicative practices in Pakistani educational institutions (Ahmad & Rao, 2013; Sultana & Imran, 2024; Gul et al., 2022(a) and 2022(b)). This environmental constrain reinforces local language, limited meaningful interactions and poor fluency. This constraint is characterized by lack of exposure to academic and professional communication. Poor institution infrastructure including lack of language and research labs, and advanced communication courses specifically in under develop rural contexts (Brown, 2014: Mahmood et al., 2023; Gul et al., 2023; Ahmed et al.,2025;Habib et al.,2024). Following the previous claim one of the respondent of the study says, "I haven't seen the language labs in our University" explicitly reflect a need to integrate modern technologies.

The systematic barriers to grammatical competencies are attributed to their earlier instructional practices. The root memorization, translation and textual understanding of text are the results of causing difficulties to achieve advanced spoken proficiency. In accordance with Al- Khalil`s (2015) critique of language pedagogy in Pakistan, where communicative practices are compromised with linguistic knowledge. Similarly, (Shamim, 2011; Gul et al., 2024; Hassan et al.,2026; Sajjad et al.,2023) claim that such approaches are predominately followed in rural context, where classroom interaction is unsupportive. This can be clearly depicted in the direct quotation from one of the respondent's interview transcript, "Students treat language as passing goal, and they just take it as academic not a practical tool, says Oliver. Consequently learner demonstrates linguistic knowledge but cannot express, due to fear of public study and social anxiety.

Another significant barrier emerged as a central theme is particularly anxiety and fear of social judgment. Respondents such as Mr. Leo claims *"…that they might fear of being laugh at and mocked …" reflect* an overly conscious speaking environment. In accordance with the above quote Horwitz`s (2020) studied language speaking anxiety. He identifies that speakers fear language errors and negative criticism from peer and teachers and it's the main obstacle to speaking participation. This resulted in the tendency to over-accuracy and language simplification. Participant consistently monitors their speech, using simple structure and vocabulary in order to avoid mistakes. This resulted in limited participation of the respondents, leads to a major deficit in high qualified language user spoken proficiency.

The present study demonstrates that these barriers are interconnected system rather than isolated obstacles. The local language dominance leads to limited practice opportunities, leading to limited spoken proficiency and gradual increased in losing confidence and increasing anxiety. The participants noted that is the significant reason even high qualified language user avoids communicative practices. While earlier studies such as Nakhalah (2016) have identified similar linguistics and psychological challenges among EFL learners, this research extends the literature by elaborating how the existing challenges are embedded within the institutional and social context of KUST.

The findings suggest some practical improvement that is required to integrate in institutional reforms including, environmental, pedagogical, and affective aspects. Modern curriculum and teaching methodologies need to consider on the top. Future studies may address the ratio of

practical integration of the modern curriculum and teaching methods in higher education institute, specifically in language classrooms.

Recommendations of the Study

The study recommends a significant shift in teaching pedagogy from traditional grammar-focused instruction to communicative and interaction-based approaches. Since the findings reveal overreliance on rote memorization and the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), universities should adopt Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to promote spontaneous and meaningful speaking practice. Idiomatic competence should be systematically integrated into the curriculum through contextualized activities such as role plays, academic simulations, discussions, and presentations rather than isolated memorization of idiom lists. Teaching practices should also be aligned with IELTS speaking band descriptors so that learners clearly understand the international criteria for advanced proficiency, including fluency, lexical resource, pronunciation, and grammatical range. Furthermore, classrooms must foster a supportive, non-judgmental environment where mistakes are treated as part of the learning process, thereby reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation in English-medium academic communication.

For future research, the study suggests expanding beyond qualitative exploration to include quantitative and mixed-method investigations. Researchers may examine the correlation between idiomatic expression use and IELTS speaking band scores to provide statistical validation of the present findings. Longitudinal studies could track postgraduate scholars over time to measure the impact of structured idiom-focused interventions on advanced speaking development. Comparative studies across disciplines, gender, and educational backgrounds would offer broader contextual insights, while experimental research could evaluate the effectiveness of communicative approaches versus traditional methods in improving spoken proficiency. Expanding the sample size to multiple universities would also enhance the generalizability of findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of advanced spoken language challenges in higher education contexts. More particularly the study recommends the following points:

- ➢ The present study opens a room for a quantitative study in order to measure the correlation between the idiomatic expressions and spoken language proficiency.
- ➢ A longitudinal study including high qualified language users with greater sample size could be considered.
- ➢ A comparative study to identify the frequency of idiomatic expressions between male and female participants at KUST could be taken into consideration.

Implications of the Study

The study contributes to add into deeper understanding of idiomatic competence, a significant factor in achieving advanced spoken proficiency. The findings of the study offer practical and actionable plans for the curriculum developer, teachers and language learners at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), for the integration of idiomatic expressions in language use. Furthermore, the study offers a major shift in from grammatical competence towards communicative competence, especially in the context of high- stakes assessments such as IELTS. Hence, the study has a broader scope for academic and professional spoken communication, and stresses idiomatic expressions from classroom presentation, meetings and international conference.

5. Conclusion

The thematic content analysis of the challenges faced by high qualified language users at KUST demonstrates complex and overlook problems in the achievement of advanced spoken language proficiency. The findings shows that environmental, social and psychological barriers, plays a vital role in limiting spoken language proficiency. The origin of these challenges originated from the basic foundational level and remained consistent, ultimately affecting spoken proficiency even at higher education. The present study confirms that highly qualified language users at KUST faces problems in reaching advanced spoken proficiency.

Furthermore, internationally recognized criteria for reaching advanced spoken proficiency, as outlined in IELTS band descriptor is clearly defined. Yet, there is limited awareness of the standard criteria and its relevance, in real world application. As a result, locally constructed definition of advanced spoken proficiency remained. Therefore, the study highlights some practical methods of teaching advanced spoken skills.

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