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LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES FACED BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the linguistic challenges faced by Grade 10 students in public high schools in District D.I. Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It aimed to identify the major difficulties students encounter in learning English, examine differences between Pashto-speaking and Saraiki-speaking students, and investigate gender-based variations in linguistic challenges. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed to collect data from secondary school students using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, were used to identify the most prominent challenges, while inferential statistics were applied to examine differences between language-background and gender groups. The findings revealed that Speaking Skills and Pragmatic Anxiety ($M = 4.18$) and Writing Mechanics ($M = 4.02$) were the most prominent areas of difficulty. The results also indicated significantly greater phonological challenges among Pashto-speaking students ($p < .001$, $d = 0.68$). Although the overall gender comparison did not reveal a statistically significant difference, female students reported significantly higher oral anxiety ($p = .003$, $d = -0.31$). These findings highlight the importance of addressing pronunciation difficulties, writing weaknesses, first-language transfer, and speaking anxiety in English language instruction. The study recommends communicative language teaching, structured writing practice, targeted pronunciation activities, supportive classroom environments, and teacher professional development. The findings may inform English language teaching practices and educational planning for improving English proficiency among secondary school students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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INTRODUCTION

The global stature of English as an international *lingua franca* has established it as a mandatory core component of school curricula worldwide. In multilingual societies, English functions not only as a taught academic subject but also as the official medium of instruction for higher education, science, technology, and governance. In Pakistan, proficiency in English carries substantial social prestige and serves as an essential gatekeeper for academic achievement, competitive civil service examinations, and socio-economic mobility. Consequently, public secondary school systems across the country are mandated to prepare students to achieve a high level of English language proficiency that supports both immediate educational requirements and future career opportunities.

Secondary education—specifically Grade 9 and Grade 10—represents a critical developmental juncture in a student's language acquisition journey. At this stage, learners must transition from basic interpersonal communicative skills to the cognitively demanding academic language required for processing complex subject

textbooks, writing formal essays, and sitting for standardized public examinations. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), public secondary school students are expected to process subject-matter content presented in English while simultaneously developing their mastery of the target language. However, despite years of compulsory English instruction starting from primary school, a significant proficiency gap remains between the curricular expectations and the actual language capabilities of secondary school students.

In classroom practice, this proficiency gap manifests across multiple linguistic domains, presenting persistent obstacles for learners. Secondary school educators in KP frequently report that while students can memorize and reproduce prepared answers for high-stakes examinations, they struggle to construct original grammatical sentences, read subject texts independently, or articulate spontaneous thoughts. These pervasive difficulties stem from core linguistic challenges, including phonological interference, restricted vocabulary breadth and depth, complex syntactic structures, and unfamiliar pragmatic norms. Without adequate language production skills, students frequently resort to mechanical memorization, which masks their lack of genuine functional comprehension and communicative proficiency.

A primary underlying cause of these linguistic hurdles is the structural distance and negative transfer ($L1$ interference) between students' native languages and English. In District Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan), KP, the secondary student population predominantly speaks Pashto or Saraiki as their first language. The deep-seated phonetic, grammatical, and syntactic disparities between these local languages and English—such as differences in word order, auxiliary systems, article usage, and phonemic inventories—create systematic, persistent patterns of error. Furthermore, these linguistic barriers do not exist in isolation; they are intensified by instructional constraints, including large class sizes, grammar-translation methods, examination-driven teaching, and socio-affective barriers such as severe foreign language classroom anxiety.

To address these challenges effectively, empirical investigation into the specific nature and underlying sources of learners' difficulties is essential. While existing literature highlights broader issues in second language acquisition within Pakistan, localized research focusing on secondary school students in linguistically diverse districts like D.I. Khan remains limited. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the major linguistic challenges faced by Grade 10 students in public high schools across D.I. Khan, evaluating the differential impact of first-language backgrounds (Pashto and Saraiki), and assessing gender-based variations. Ultimately, the study seeks to propose targeted, context-appropriate pedagogical strategies to help educators shift from rote-oriented instruction toward communicative competence and functional literacy.

Statement of The Problem

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, English is a compulsory subject and the primary medium of instruction for secondary education. However, despite years of formal schooling, a substantial proportion of secondary school students (Grades 9 and 10) in District Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan) fail to achieve functional language proficiency (Ali et al., 2024). Recent empirical evidence reveals that high examination scores among Secondary School Certificate (SSC) students often mask severe linguistic deficits, as learners predominantly rely on rote memorization and guidebooks to clear tests rather than developing genuine communicative competence (Ali et al., 2024; Khan & Shah, 2024). Consequently, students face persistent, multifaceted challenges across core linguistic domains—including phonology, academic vocabulary, grammatical syntax, reading comprehension, writing mechanics, listening, speaking, and pragmatics—preventing them from processing complex subject textbooks or producing original language independently.

A primary cause of these persistent language hurdles is the structural distance and negative transfer ($L1$ interference) from students' native mother tongues, particularly Pashto and Saraiki (Sana et al., 2025; Shah & Khan, 2026). Divergent phonetic structures, word-order patterns, article systems, and prepositional usages between local languages and English lead to systematic learner errors, which are further exacerbated by examination-driven teaching methods, teacher-dominated classrooms, and foreign language anxiety (Rehan, 2023). Despite the severity of these issues, localized empirical research examining how specific linguistic challenges vary across Pashto and Saraiki native speakers and between male and female students in District D.I. Khan remains scarce. Without a targeted investigation into these specific linguistic barriers, educators and policymakers cannot implement effective diagnostic remedies or communicative pedagogical strategies to bridge the gap between curriculum demands and student learning outcomes.

Objectives of The Study

I. **To identify the major linguistic difficulties** faced by secondary school students in English vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking in District D.I. Khan, KP.
II. **To examine the comparative effects** of students' first-language backgrounds (L1L1L1: Pashto vs. Saraiki) and gender on their English language learning challenges at the secondary school level.

Research Questions

I. **What are the primary linguistic challenges** (in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, writing, listening, and speaking) encountered by Grade 10 students in public secondary schools of District D.I. Khan, KP?
II. **How do students perceived linguistic challenges vary** based on their first-language backgrounds (Pashto vs. Saraiki) and gender?

Research Hypotheses

I. **H01H_ {01}H01:** There is no statistically significant difference in the perceived linguistic challenges in learning English between secondary school students with Pashto and Saraiki first-language backgrounds in District D.I. Khan, KP.
II. **H02H_ {02}H02:** There is no statistically significant difference in the perceived linguistic challenges in learning English between male and female secondary school students in District D.I. Khan, KP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning English at the secondary school level in multilingual developing nations involves mastering interconnected linguistic domains—phonology, vocabulary, syntax, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and pragmatics. In Pakistan, English functions as a crucial institutional language, serving as the official medium for competitive examinations, higher education, and public administration. However, empirical evidence shows that secondary school learners across the country, particularly in public education systems, struggle to acquire functional proficiency after years of compulsory schooling. These difficulties do not arise in isolation; they are driven by cross-linguistic interference from learners' mother tongues (L1), examination-driven teaching methods, low exposure to authentic target language input, and socio-affective barriers.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), recent research underscores a noticeable disparity between student performance on standardized public examinations and their actual functional language abilities. Ali et al. (2024) investigated standardized assessment reliability and student preparation behaviours among Secondary School Certificate (SSC) students in KP. Their findings revealed a substantial gap between students' board examination marks and their actual language proficiency, driven by a heavy reliance on mechanical rote memorization, guidebooks, and copied model essays to clear examinations. This practice creates an illusion of academic achievement while obscuring severe underlying language deficits in spontaneous language production, independent reading comprehension, and critical analysis.

A major structural cause of English learning difficulties in linguistically diverse regions like KP is L1 cross-linguistic interference or negative transfer. When learners attempt to process or produce English, they unconsciously rely on the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic rules of their primary native languages. A study by Sana et al. (2025) examined $L1$ barriers among rural secondary school students and identified $L1$ structural interference as a primary cause of non-standard sentence structures, limited active vocabulary, and speaking hesitation. In KP, where Pashto and Saraiki are the predominant mother tongues, big structural differences in word order, auxiliary systems, article conventions, and prepositional usages create predictable, recurring error patterns among secondary school learners.

The impact of L1interference is particularly pronounced in phonology and pronunciation. English possesses a complex spelling-to-sound relationship and a rich phonemic inventory that contrasts sharply with the sound systems of Pashto and Saraiki. Shah and Khan (2026) conducted a qualitative phonological error analysis of Pashto-speaking students in KP and identified systematic difficulties with specific English consonant and vowel contrasts, such as confusion between the voiced labiodental fricative $/v/$ and voiced bilabial approximant $/w/$, alongside spelling pattern confusions. Furthermore, learners frequently exhibit vowel epenthesis—inserting a vowel sound into initial consonant clusters (e.g., pronouncing *school* as *iskool*)—to align English structures with the syllable patterns of their home language.

Beyond phonology, vocabulary acquisition and grammatical competence represent twin hurdles for secondary school learners. Academic reading comprehension requires familiarity with high-

frequency general vocabulary as well as specialized subject terminology. However, secondary students in KP frequently display restricted vocabulary breadth and depth. Learners rely heavily on word-for-word translation from their mother tongue, leading to unnatural collocations (e.g., *"doing a decision"* or *"strong rain"*) and an inability to parse polysemous words. In grammar, difficulties centre on tense and aspect systems, prepositions, article omissions, subject-verb agreement (such as omitting the third-person singular *-s*), and complex sentence embedding, which hinder both reading comprehension and writing development.

Instructional strategies and textbook design further influence how these linguistic difficulties develop in public school classrooms. Khan and Shah (2024) evaluated the role of secondary school English textbooks and teaching practices in language skills development across KP. Their findings revealed that while educators held positive attitudes toward textbook content, they struggled to achieve the communicative objectives of the curriculum due to insufficient classroom practice for speaking, listening, and independent writing. Classroom interaction remains predominantly teacher-centred and examination-focused, leaving students with few opportunities to engage in meaningful output necessary for procedural language mastery.

Taken together, current literature shows that linguistic challenges faced by secondary school students in KP stem from a combination of $L1$ structural interference, exam-oriented instruction, limited authentic language exposure, and classroom anxiety. While existing studies examine single skill domains or broader national trends, localized empirical research addressing how these challenges manifest specifically across distinct mother-tongue backgrounds—such as Pashto and Saraiki—and across gender groups in District Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan) remains limited. Investigating these specific variables is essential for designing targeted pedagogical frameworks, diagnostic assessment tools, and context-sensitive instructional strategies at the secondary level.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Proper methodology and procedures have been used to investigate the linguistic challenges faced by secondary school students in learning English in District Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan.

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive-comparative survey research design. Descriptive research is suitable for measuring, describing, and interpreting current conditions, characteristics, and perceptions without manipulating study variables (Best & Kahn, 2006).

The design consists of two primary analytical dimensions:

1. **Descriptive Analysis:** To evaluate, rank, and summarize the severity of student-reported linguistic difficulties across seven core domains: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading comprehension, writing mechanics, listening comprehension, and speaking skills.
2. **Comparative Analysis:** To determine whether statistically significant differences exist in reported linguistic challenges based on two primary demographic factors: first-language background (L1: Pashto vs. Saraiki) and gender (Male vs. Female).

Population of the Study

The target population for this study comprises all Grade 10 students enrolled in public (government) high schools and higher secondary schools across District Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan), KP, for the 2026–2027 academic session. Grade 10 students were chosen because they have completed Grade 9 coursework, giving them sufficient academic exposure to articulate the linguistic challenges they encounter in secondary education.

Based on official enrollment records from the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) D.I. Khan and local educational administrative offices, the total target population of Grade 10 students in public high schools across the district is **N = 17,000**.

Target Population Distribution by First Language (L1)

S. No.	Language Background (L1)	Target Population (N)	Percentage (%)
1	Pashto	7,879	46.35%
2	Saraiki	9,121	53.65%
Total		**17,000**	**100.00%**

Sample Size and Cross-Tabulated Sampling Framework

The sample size was established using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination model. For a target population of N = 17,000, at a 95% confidence level and a 5\% margin of error (e = 0.05), the required minimum sample size is n = 377 students.

To ensure accurate representation across both linguistic background and gender, the sample was stratified proportionally across Pashto-speaking and Saraiki-speaking male and female cohorts in public secondary schools.

Sample Distribution by Language Background (L1) and Gender

S. No.	Language Background (L1)	Female (n)	Male (n)	Total Sample (n)	Proportion of Sample (%)
1	Pashto	84	91	175	46.42%
2	Saraiki	98	104	202	53.58%
Total	**Subtotal by Gender**	**182 (48.28%)**	**195 (51.72%)**	**377**	**100.00%**

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a self-administered structured survey questionnaire titled the **"Linguistic Challenges in Learning English Scale "**, designed specifically around the objectives and theoretical framework of the study.

Measurement validity was established through systematic qualitative and quantitative evaluation:

1. **Content Validity Index (CVI):** The draft instrument was evaluated by an expert panel comprising senior faculty members from the Department of Education and the Department of English, Gomal University, D.I. Khan. Items were rated for construct coverage, domain representativeness, and clarity. Items achieving a Content Validity Index (CVI) score of 0.80 or higher were retained.
2. **Face Validity & Teacher Review:** The questionnaire was reviewed by 10 experienced secondary school English teachers in public high schools in D.I. Khan to verify that item phrasing and formatting were clear and age-appropriate for Grade 10 public school students.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using **Cronbach's alpha** in IBM SPSS Statistics.

In educational research, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 or higher is acceptable, while values of 0.80 indicate high internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). The pilot study yielded an overall scale reliability coefficient of **alpha = 0.87**, demonstrating strong measurement stability across all subscales.

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients by Domain (alpha)

Scale / Subscale Domain	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Grammar & Syntax	5	0.82
Vocabulary & Collocations	5	0.79
Phonology & Pronunciation	4	0.76
Reading Comprehension	4	0.81
Writing Mechanics	4	0.84
Listening Comprehension	4	0.78
Speaking & Pragmatics	4	0.83
Overall Instrument	**30**	**0.87**

Data Collection Procedure

1. **Formal Permissions:** Official permission and ethical clearance were obtained from district education officers (DEOs) and school principals across District D.I. Khan.
2. **Field Administration:** The researcher administered the questionnaires in person during scheduled class periods.
3. **Participant Briefing:** Respondents received instructions explaining the purpose of the study, confirming voluntary participation, and assuring complete response anonymity.
4. **Data Retrieval:** Questionnaires were collected immediately upon completion, yielding a 100 % response rate (n = 377).

Data Analysis and Results

This Portion presents the empirical findings derived from the statistical analysis of data collected from Grade 10 public secondary school students in District Dera Ismail Khan (D.I. Khan), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0).

The analysis is structured into three main sections:

1. **Demographic Profile of Respondents:** Descriptive summary of the sample (n = 377).
2. **Descriptive Analysis of Linguistic Challenges:** Item-level and domain-level means (bar{X}) and standard deviations (SD) addressing **Research Question 1 / Objective 1**.
3. **Inferential Analysis and Hypotheses Testing:** Independent-samples t-tests evaluating H_ {01} (L1$background differences) and H_ {02} (gender differences) addressing **Research Question 2 / Objective 2**.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of n = 377 valid questionnaires were retrieved from public secondary school students across District D.I. Khan. The sample was cross-tabulated by primary mother tongue (L1: Pashto vs. Saraiki) and gender (Female vs. Male).

Demographic Cross-Tabulation of Sample by L1 Background and Gender

L1 Language Background	Female (n)	Male (n)	Total Sample (n)	Percentage (%)
Pashto	84	91	175	46.42%
Saraiki	98	104	202	53.58%
Total	**182**	**195**	**377**	**100.00%**
Percentage (%)	**48.28%**	**51.72%**	**100.00%**	—

Note. Data gathered from public high schools in District D.I. Khan (n = 377).

Descriptive Analysis: Major Linguistic Challenges (RQ1 / Objective 1)

To identify and rank the primary linguistic difficulties encountered by secondary school students, mean scores (bar{X}) and standard deviations (SD) were calculated for all seven subscales on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = text {Strongly Disagree / Low Difficulty} to 5 = text {Strongly Agree / High Difficulty}).

Interpretation Key

- 1.00 - 2.33: Low Difficulty
- 2.34 - 3.66: Moderate Difficulty
- 3.67 - 5.00: High / Severe Difficulty

Overall Descriptive Summary and Ranking of Linguistic Challenge Domains

Rank	Domain / Subscale	No. of Items	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Difficulty Level
1	Speaking & Pragmatic Anxiety	4	4.18	0.68	High Difficulty
2	Writing Mechanics & Structure	4	4.02	0.71	High Difficulty
3	Grammar & Syntactic Structures	5	3.94	0.65	High Difficulty
4	Vocabulary Breadth & Collocations	5	3.86	0.69	High Difficulty
5	Phonology & Pronunciation	4	3.79	0.74	High Difficulty
6	Reading Comprehension	4	3.68	0.70	High Difficulty
7	Listening Comprehension	4	3.55	0.72	Moderate Difficulty
Overall	**Linguistic Challenges (Total)**	**30**	**3.86**	**0.58**	**High Difficulty**

1. Speaking Skills & Pragmatics

Students reported the highest level of difficulty in oral communication. Classroom anxiety (bar{X} = 4.31, SD = 0.72) and fear of negative evaluation when speaking English in front of peers were major contributing factors.

2. Writing Mechanics

Writing difficulties were driven by an inability to construct original paragraphs without relying on memorized sample texts (bar{X} = 4.15, SD = 0.76) and errors in punctuation and spelling mechanics (bar{X} = 3.89, SD = 0.81).

Domain / Subscale	Pashto (n=175) Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Saraiki (n=202) Mean ($\bar{X}$)	t-value	df	p-value (2-tailed)	Cohen's d
Phonology & Pronunciation	4.05	3.56	6.54	375	< .001	0.68
Grammar & Syntax	4.02	3.87	2.21	375	.028	0.23
Vocabulary & Collocations	3.81	3.90	-1.26	375	.208	-0.13
Reading Comprehension	3.62	3.73	-1.51	375	.132	-0.16
Writing Mechanics	4.08	3.97	1.48	375	.140	0.15
Listening Comprehension	3.48	3.61	-1.74	375	.083	-0.18
Speaking & Pragmatics	4.22	4.14	1.13	375	.259	0.12
Overall Total	**3.94**	**3.79**	**2.52**	**375**	**.012**	**0.26**

3. Grammar & Syntactic Structures

Students reported severe difficulties in mastering prepositions (bar{X} = 4.08, SD = 0.73), tense consistency (bar{X} = 3.95, SD = 0.70), subject-verb agreement (bar{X} = 3.88, SD = 0.79), and article usage (bar{X} = 3.85, SD = 0.82).

4. Vocabulary & Collocations

Direct L1-to-English literal translation errors accounted for significant vocabulary challenges (bar{X} = 4.11, SD = 0.75), alongside restricted academic vocabulary range (bar{X} = 3.82, SD = 0.78).

Inferential Analysis & Hypotheses Testing (RQ2 / Objective 2)

Hypothesis 1 (H_ {01}): Comparison by First Language Background (L1)

- H_ {01}**:** There is no statistically significant difference in perceived linguistic challenges between Pashto-speaking and Saraiki-speaking secondary school students in District D.I. Khan.

An **Independent-Samples t-Test** was conducted to compare challenge scores across the two linguistic groups.

Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Pashto and Saraiki L1 Speakers

- H_ {01}**:** There is no statistically significant difference in perceived linguistic challenges between Pashto-speaking and Saraiki-speaking secondary school students in District D.I. Khan.

An **Independent-Samples t-Test** was conducted to compare challenge scores across the two linguistic groups.

Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Pashto and Saraiki L1 Speakers

* *Statistically significant at* alpha = 0.05.

Statistical Decision for H_ {01}

The overall t-test indicates a statistically significant difference in mean challenge scores between Pashto speakers (bar{X} = 3.94, SD = 0.55) and Saraiki speakers (bar{X} = 3.79, SD = 0.59); t (375) = 2.52, p = .012, d = 0.26. Therefore, H_ {01} is rejected. Pashto speakers experienced significantly higher difficulties in Phonology & Pronunciation (p < .001) and Grammar & Syntax (p = .028) due to structural L1distance.

Hypothesis 2 (H_ {02}): Comparison by Gender

- H_ {02}: There is no statistically significant difference in perceived linguistic challenges between male and female secondary school students in District D.I. Khan.

Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Male and Female Students

Domain / Subscale	Male (n=195) Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Female (n=182) Mean ($\bar{X}$)	t-value	df	p-value (2-tailed)	Cohen's d
Phonology & Pronunciation	3.82	3.76	0.78	375	.436	0.08
Grammar & Syntax	3.91	3.97	-0.89	375	.374	-0.09
Vocabulary & Collocations	3.84	3.88	-0.56	375	.576	-0.06
Reading Comprehension	3.71	3.65	0.83	375	.407	0.09
Writing Mechanics	4.05	3.99	0.81	375	.418	0.08
Listening Comprehension	3.58	3.52	0.80	375	.424	0.08
Speaking & Pragmatics	4.08	4.29	-3.02	375	.003*	-0.31
Overall Total	**3.85**	**3.87**	**-0.33**	**375**	**.742**	**-0.03**

* *Statistically significant at alpha = 0.05.*

Statistical Decision for H_ {02}

The overall t-test shows no statistically significant difference between male (bar{X} = 3.85, SD = 0.57) and female (bar{X} = 3.87, SD = 0.59) students across the overall scale; t (375) = -0.33, p = .742. Therefore, H_ {02} is retained.

However, female students reported significantly higher difficulty in Speaking & Pragmatic Anxiety (bar{X} = 4.29) compared to males (bar{X} = 4.08); t(375) = -3.02, p = .003, d = -0.31.

Summary Matrix of Hypotheses Testing Decisions

Hypothesis	Variables Compared	Statistical Test	Key Statistical Results	Empirical Decision
H_ {01}	Pashto (n=175) vs. Saraiki (n=202)	Independent t-test	t (375) = 2.52, p = .012, d = 0.26	**Rejected** (Significant L1 effect)
H_ {02}	Male (n=195) vs. Female (n=182)	Independent t-test	t(375) = -0.33, p = .742, d = -0.03	**Retained** (No overall gender effect)

DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the empirical findings with theoretical models and previous literature.

Synthesis of Descriptive Findings (RQ1 & Objective 1)

The findings demonstrate that Grade 10 students in public high schools in District D.I. Khan experience substantial difficulties across core English language domains. The highest mean scores were observed in Speaking Skills & Pragmatic Anxiety (bar{X} = 4.18) and Writing Mechanics (bar{X} = 4.02).

1. **Theoretical Context: BICS vs. CALP (Cummins, 1979)**

These results support **Cummins' (1979) Distinction between BICS and CALP**. Public secondary school curricula demand Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) for writing board essays and parsing subject-matter textbooks. However, instruction in KP public schools relies on rote memorization and grammar translation (Khan & Shah, 2024), leaving students without functional academic proficiency.

2. **Theoretical Context: Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982)**

The severe oral difficulty and classroom hesitation support **Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis**. High anxiety, fear of peer ridicule, and teacher-centered error correction raise the affective filter, preventing comprehensible input from turning into acquired language.

3. **Theoretical Context: Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985)**

The reliance on memorized model answers in writing validates **Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis**. Without opportunities to generate original language output and receive diagnostic feedback, learners fail to push their interlanguage toward accuracy.

Discussion of L1 Differences: Pashto vs. Saraiki (H_ {01})

The rejection of H_ {01} confirms that cross-linguistic distance (L1 interference) plays a major role in shaping second language acquisition obstacles (Odlin, 1989).

1. **Phonological Negative Transfer**

Pashto speakers exhibited significantly higher phonological challenges (p < .001, d = 0.68). As established by Shah and Khan (2026), Pashto phonology lacks contrasts such as v vs.w, leading to confusion between pairs like *vine* and *wine*. Furthermore, Pashto syllable patterns trigger **consonant cluster epenthesis**, causing learners to insert an initial vowel into clusters (e.g., pronouncing *school* as *iskool*).

2. **Syntactic Disparities**

Pashto is a strict Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) language, whereas English is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). Pashto learners exhibited persistent structural transfer errors when forming complex clauses. Conversely, Saraiki relies on postpositional structures, causing Saraiki native speakers to make recurring errors in English prepositions (e.g., *"discuss about"* or *"depend of"*).

Discussion of Gender Variations (H_ {02})

The retention of H_ {02} indicates that macro-level structural obstacles—such as prescribed textbooks, board examination formats, and large class sizes—affect male and female public-school students similarly. However, the domain-level analysis revealed that **female students experienced significantly higher oral anxiety** (p = .003, d = -0.31). This outcome aligns with findings by Horwitz et al. (1986) and Rehan (2023), confirming that social expectations, limited oral participation opportunities, and fear of public error increase foreign language anxiety among female learners in rural and semi-urban learning contexts.

Summary of Theoretical Alignment

Observed Challenge / Effect	Primary theoretical Driver	Empirical Literature Support
High Oral & Writing Hesitation	Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen) & Output Hypothesis (Swain)	Rehan (2023); Ali & Umer (2024)
Pashto Phonological & Cluster Errors	Language Transfer / Contrastive Analysis (Odlin)	Shah & Khan (2026); Sana et al. (2025)
Fossilized Tense & Article Errors	Interlanguage Theory & Fossilization (Selinker)	Farooq & Sajid (2022); Mahmood et al. (2023)
Academic Text Comprehension Deficits	BICS vs. CALP Framework (Cummins)	Cummins (1979); Khan & Shah (2024)

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the linguistic challenges faced by Grade 10 students in public high schools in District D.I. Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The findings revealed that Speaking Skills and Pragmatic Anxiety (M = 4.18) and Writing Mechanics (M = 4.02) were the most prominent areas of difficulty. The results also highlighted differences in phonological challenges between Pashto-speaking and Saraiki-speaking students, suggesting that first-language background may influence certain aspects of English language learning. Although overall linguistic challenges did not differ significantly by gender, female students reported significantly higher oral anxiety. These findings emphasize the importance of considering linguistic diversity, students' confidence, and specific language-learning needs when designing English language instruction.

The study concludes that improving English language proficiency requires a balanced approach that combines communicative language teaching, systematic pronunciation practice, structured writing activities, constructive feedback, and a supportive classroom environment. English teachers should provide students with regular opportunities to express their ideas, practise speaking, and develop original written responses rather than relying primarily on memorization. School administrators and education policymakers should support these efforts through teacher professional development, appropriate learning resources, and assessment practices that promote practical language competence. Although the findings are limited to the study context, they provide useful insights for improving English language teaching at the secondary school level and suggest the need for further research into effective strategies for addressing students' linguistic challenges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Improve Speaking and Writing Skills: English** teachers should incorporate daily speaking activities, including pair discussions, role-play, storytelling, and presentations, alongside weekly writing exercises focusing on grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and paragraph organization. Regular feedback should be provided to monitor students' progress.
2. **Address First-Language Interference:** Teachers should identify common pronunciation and grammatical difficulties experienced by Pashto-speaking and Saraiki-speaking students. Contrastive language activities, pronunciation drills, and sentence-construction exercises should be used to address these difficulties according to students' individual learning needs.
3. **Reduce Oral Anxiety and Promote Equal Participation**: Teachers should establish a supportive classroom environment in which students can speak English without fear of criticism or ridicule. Pair work, small-group discussions, and gradual oral presentations should be encouraged, with particular attention to students who experience higher levels of speaking anxiety and ensuring equal participation opportunities for male and female students.
4. **Strengthen Teacher Training and Institutional Support:** School administrators and education authorities should organize professional development workshops on communicative language teaching, pronunciation instruction, and writing assessment. Schools should establish English language clubs, provide supplementary learning materials, and conduct regular assessments to evaluate students' progress in speaking, writing, reading, and listening.

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