

A Study on Social and Cultural Factors involved in L1 Attrition among Undergraduate ESL Learners in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study delves into the intricate interplay between second language (L2) proficiency, social, and cultural factors, and their collective influence on first language (L1) attrition among undergraduate ESL learners in a predominantly L1-dominant environment. In a world where English often takes center stage as a global lingua franca, this research scrutinizes the experiences of ESL learners in Pakistan, a context where Urdu is the native language and English holds a dominant position in academia and society.

Methodology: Employing a qualitative approach, this study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from ESL undergraduates. The research population was selected from various disciplines in Pakistani universities to ensure diverse perspectives. The qualitative approach employs thematic analysis to uncover rich narratives and insights into participants' experiences.

Findings: Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, social and cultural factors contributing to L1 attrition were explored. Several key themes emerged from the qualitative data, including the pressure to prioritize English over Urdu, the impact of language exposure, and the perceived societal value of English proficiency. Notably, participants report experiencing social pressure to prioritize English in both academic and social settings, which can lead to feelings of embarrassment when using Urdu. Exposure to English in media, advertising, and education also emerges as a significant contributor to L1 attrition.

Conclusion: This study underscores the need for balanced language approaches that preserve cultural identity. Findings provide insights for educators and policymakers, enhancing our comprehension of socio-cultural aspects affecting L1 attrition among ESL students.

Keywords: ESL Learners, L1, L2, Attrition, English Language.

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Introduction

In our interconnected world, language acquisition and proficiency have gained paramount importance across academic, professional, and social contexts. In such linguistic diversity, the concept of language attrition has emerged as a captivating subject of inquiry, exploring how individuals' native languages (L1) undergo transformations due to exposure to second languages (L2) (Smith, 2019). This study delves into the intricate fabric of language attrition, specifically focusing on the experiences of undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners within a cultural milieu predominantly dominated by their first language, Urdu.

Traditionally, prevailing beliefs suggested that one's L1 maintained a resilient position, resistant to the influence of L2 exposure (Weinreich, 1974; Hyltenstam & Obler, 1989). However, contemporary research has dispelled this notion, acknowledging the susceptibility of L1 to attrition, wherein gradual decline ensues due to prolonged engagement with an L2 (de Bot, 2004). This shift in perspective has prompted a deeper exploration into the multifaceted dynamics underlying L1 attrition among ESL learners. In bilingual environments, many individuals undergo alterations in their native language (L1) due to reduced use (resulting in decreased accessibility) and the influence of the dominant contact language (Yilmaz, 2018).

This study places a significant emphasis on the intricate interplay of social and cultural influences in shaping L1 attrition. According to Rabiah (2018), a sociocultural perspective highlights that language is more than just a means of communication; it is intricately linked to one's identity and sense of cultural belonging. Scholars have highlighted the interconnectedness between language shift and broader cultural changes, indicating that language attrition can extend beyond linguistic alterations to encompass shifts in cultural identity (Keesing, 1974). Thus, the understanding of sociocultural factors' role in L1 attrition gains prominence.

Situated within the diverse landscape of Pakistan, this study uniquely hones in on the experiences of ESL learners in an environment where Urdu, a language of high cultural and national significance, coexists with the global prominence of English. The multilingual and multicultural context of Pakistan adds layers of complexity, where English serves as a conduit for academic and professional progress, a language of international interaction, and a medium of instruction in educational institutions (Shamim, 2019).

The overarching purpose of this research is to unravel the intricate dynamics of L1 attrition among undergraduate ESL learners, with a specific lens on the social and cultural factors that play a pivotal role. Guiding this exploration, the following research question shapes the investigation:

Research Question

- What are the social and cultural factors that influence L1 attrition among ESL learners in this culturally diverse environment?

Objectives of this Study

This research goes beyond just language and explores the complex web of L1 attrition among Pakistani ESL undergraduates in environments where their native language holds dominance. It seeks to uncover the intricate relationship between language, culture, and societal influences, aiming to provide a comprehensive perspective on the impact of language attrition in today's interconnected world.

Significance of the Study

This study's significance resonates widely, encompassing educators, policymakers, and researchers in the realm of language and education. By probing into the multifaceted interactions between language, culture, and identity, the insights gleaned from this research can guide interventions that embrace a more holistic approach to language education. Moreover, the study adds to the broader tapestry of knowledge

concerning language attrition within culturally diverse contexts, thereby illuminating the unique challenges and prospects encountered by ESL learners.

In conclusion, this study embarks on an exploratory journey into the realm of L1 attrition among undergraduate ESL learners, delving into the intricate tapestry of social and cultural influences. By grounding the research within the context of Pakistan's diverse sociolinguistic landscape, the study aims to shed light on the experiences of ESL learners grappling with the phenomenon of language attrition.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of language attrition, where individuals experience a gradual decline in their first language (L1) due to increased exposure to a second language (L2), has gained significant attention in the field of applied linguistics. As societies become more interconnected and multilingualism becomes the norm, the factors influencing L1 attrition have become a subject of inquiry (Gallo, 2021). This literature review examines existing research on the social and cultural factors involved in L1 attrition among undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, with a specific focus on the Pakistani context.

The theories surrounding the intricate relationship between language and culture have a significant bearing on the factors involved in L1 attrition. When language is strongly influenced by culture and serves as a reflection of cultural norms and values, changes in the cultural landscape can impact the usage and preservation of the first language (L1). Conversely, if language influences culture, shifts in language usage, particularly when adopting a second language, can contribute to changes in cultural behaviors and ways of thinking (Rabiah, 2018). These dynamics are central to understanding how social and cultural factors play a pivotal role in L1 attrition among ESL learners

Early views on L1 attrition suggested that the L1, as the language learned first, remained resistant to interference from subsequent languages (Weinreich, 1974; Hyltenstam & Obler, 1989). However, contemporary research challenges this perception, highlighting the vulnerability of the L1 to attrition (de Bot, 2004). The linguistic landscape, where L1 and L2 interact, influences the gradual decline of linguistic knowledge and control (Ammerlaan, 1987). This decline can impact communication (Lambert & Freed, 1982) and is often a result of disruptions in linguistic and cultural traditions (Anderson, 1982). L1 attrition naturally occurs as a consequence of bilingualism, as introducing an L2 to an individual's linguistic skills often results in reduced L1 utilization and the sharing of cognitive processing resources between the L1 and L2. This phenomenon highlights the intricate relationship between bilingualism and L1 attrition, shedding light on how the presence of a second language can affect the maintenance and proficiency of one's native language (Cabrelli, 2023)

The intricate relationship between language and cultural identity adds complexity to the phenomenon of L1 attrition. As ESL learners immerse themselves in L2-dominant environments, questions arise about the implications for their cultural identity. The process of L1 attrition may lead individuals to perceive themselves as opposing cultural norms and linguistic traditions (Chang, 2010). This suggests that L1 attrition is not solely a linguistic phenomenon; it intertwines with individuals' sense of belonging and cultural heritage.

Language policies within educational systems can significantly influence L1 attrition. In contexts like Pakistan, where English is both a lingua franca and a language of prestige, policies mandating English instruction may impact the proficiency and use of L1 Urdu (Cohen, 2004). In the context of L1 attrition among ESL learners, it is essential to recognize the dynamic interplay between the promotion of English proficiency for global communication and the preservation of L1 cultural identity (Zaki, 2019). This complex balance sets the stage for understanding the multifaceted factors contributing to L1 attrition within the ESL educational landscape.

Multilingual environments further complicate the dynamics of L1 attrition. Language shift, where individuals gradually replace their L1 with an L2, can occur in generational contexts (Ammerlaan, 1991).

In settings where ESL learners engage with L1-dominant communities, interactions with the L2 raises questions about how cultural and social attitudes influence language use and attrition (Lord, 2008; Schereschewsky, Alves & Kupske, 2017).

In multilingual environments, the phenomenon of code-switching, or the alternating use of two or more languages within a single conversation, becomes a mechanism for navigating diverse linguistic contexts. Code-switching can serve as a strategy for managing social identity and linguistic competence (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Among ESL learners, code-switching between L1 and L2 can be a reflection of their fluid cultural identity and adaptation to various social settings. The choices made during code-switching provide insights into how individuals negotiate their identities about their L1 and L2, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of L1 attrition.

The social networks in which individuals are embedded play a crucial role in shaping language use and attrition. Research by Milroy (1987) highlights the concept of “strong ties” within social networks, where close relationships reinforce linguistic behaviors. Within the context of L1 attrition, strong ties with L2-dominant individuals may contribute to increased L2 usage and, consequently, L1 attrition. Conversely, the maintenance of “weak ties” with L1-dominant individuals may contribute to L1 preservation. These social dynamics underscore the interplay between language, social networks, and the reinforcement of cultural identity.

Methodology

In this study qualitative research methodology was utilized to delve into the intricate interplay of social and cultural factors contributing to L1 attrition among undergraduate ESL learners. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study aims to capture the depth and richness of participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes within the context of language attrition.

Research Design

The research design is rooted in qualitative inquiry, specifically employing a phenomenological approach. This approach enables the exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meaning they ascribe to the phenomenon of L1 attrition (van Manen, 1990). Through in-depth interviews, the study seeks to uncover the multifaceted dynamics of language attrition in a culturally diverse environment.

Participants

In the present study, the sample was taken from three universities of Lahore city. Forty ESL undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 25 were included in the study for qualitative data collection. Participants were purposefully selected from undergraduate ESL learners attending three universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The criteria for selection encompass factors such as language background, duration of English language instruction, and exposure to L2-dominant contexts. This purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants possess relevant insights and perspectives related to L1 attrition in a culturally nuanced setting.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews served as the cornerstone of data collection, allowing participants to share their narratives and reflections. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate organic and exploratory conversations (Seidman, 2013). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to recount their language experiences, interactions, and perceptions of social and cultural influences on language attrition.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to dissect the qualitative data garnered from the in-depth interviews. The process of analysis was iterative and rigorous, involving several distinct stages. Transcripts were closely examined to gain familiarity with the data and immerse in participants' narratives. Meaningful segments of text were identified and coded to encapsulate key

concepts and recurring patterns. Codes were organized into potential themes, with a focus on capturing the essence of participants' experiences. Themes were critically reviewed, ensuring their relevance to the research questions and alignment with participants' narratives. Themes were refined, and precise descriptions were crafted to encapsulate the essence of each theme. The thematic analysis culminates in a coherent and engaging narrative that elucidates the role of social and cultural factors in L1 attrition, grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study involves employing strategies such as member checking and researcher reflexivity. Member checking entails presenting preliminary findings to participants, inviting their input to validate the accuracy of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, researcher reflexivity involves a critical examination of the researcher's own biases and perspectives throughout the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations underpin the entire research endeavor. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their autonomy, willingness, and confidentiality. Ethical guidelines dictate the protection of participants' identities, especially during data analysis, reporting, and publication.

Results

Outcome of Semi-Structured Interviews

One of the central areas explored during the interviews was the participants' language background. It emerged that many ESL undergraduate students had grown up using Urdu as their first language within their homes and communities. However, the formal education system introduced them to English at a young age, leading to a bilingual environment. Participants shared personal stories about their language journey, highlighting the role of English in academic settings and daily interactions. The early introduction to English and its increasing prevalence in their lives became a common narrative among the participants.

Decline in Urdu Vocabulary

The interviews provided compelling evidence of a decline in the participants' Urdu vocabulary over time. As English gained prominence in various aspects of their lives, including education, media consumption, and social interactions, participants felt that their proficiency in Urdu had been negatively affected. This decline was not limited to a mere reduction in the use of certain words; it extended to more complex linguistic structures and expressions. Several students expressed frustration over their inability to recall certain Urdu words and phrases in which they had once been proficient.

Pressure to Prioritize English over Urdu

A recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was the pressure that participants felt to prioritize English over their L1 in academic and social contexts. This pressure was attributed to the perception that English proficiency equates to intelligence and success. Many participants recounted instances where they felt compelled to use English even in informal settings to convey a sense of competence. The pressure to conform to English-speaking norms and expectations was especially evident in academic environments, where English was seen as a marker of academic achievement.

Impact of Language Exposure on L1 Proficiency

The extensive use of English in media, advertising, and education emerged as a noteworthy theme in the interviews. Participants acknowledged the significant influence of English-language content in their lives. They reported that exposure to English content, particularly through social media and online platforms, had a considerable impact on their language preferences and proficiency. This exposure was seen as

contributing to a gradual erosion of their L1 skills, as English increasingly dominated their linguistic landscape.

Importance Placed on English Proficiency in Pakistani Society

The societal value placed on English proficiency was a recurring theme in the interviews. Participants noted that English proficiency was often associated with modernity, higher education, and success. They shared anecdotes about instances where English had granted them preferential treatment or respect. However, this emphasis on English proficiency also created a dichotomy, where English was perceived as superior to their L1. The participants expressed the need for a more balanced approach that values both languages and acknowledges their unique contributions.

Factors Contributing to L1 Attrition among ESL Undergraduates

The interviews uncovered a constellation of factors that contributed to L1 attrition among ESL undergraduate students. One notable factor was the lack of opportunities to use their L1 in various contexts. English's dominance in classrooms, social gatherings, and even online spaces left little room for the participants to engage in meaningful interactions in their L1. This limited exposure contributed to a decline in their L1 proficiency.

Another significant factor was the societal pressure to prioritize English, which created a dilemma for participants. While they recognized the importance of English proficiency for academic and career advancement, they also expressed a longing to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage. Participants shared instances of feeling compelled to switch to English, even when conversing with fellow speakers of their L1, due to the perceived social status associated with English.

Family dynamics and social interactions played a pivotal role in shaping language use patterns. Participants described instances where they felt compelled to use English to conform to family expectations or to avoid being ridiculed by peers. The pressure to adapt to an English-speaking environment had implications not only for language attrition but also for the participants' cultural identity and sense of belonging.

In essence, the analysis of semi-structured interviews with ESL undergraduate students provided a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dynamics underlying L1 attrition in an L1-dominant environment. The findings highlighted the intricate interplay between language exposure, societal pressure, and individual agency in shaping language preferences and proficiency. These insights contribute to our understanding of the complex challenges faced by ESL students as they navigate a linguistic landscape where English often takes precedence over their native language. The ensuing chapter will build upon these findings, contextualizing them within the existing literature on language attrition and offering implications for language education and policy in L1-dominant environments.

Discussion

The interviews brought to the forefront the pervasive societal dynamics that exert pressure on ESL undergraduate students to prioritize English over their native language. This phenomenon resonates with Fishman's (1971) concept of language choice as a reflection of societal values and power structures. The participants' narratives echo the influence of this societal pressure on their language preferences and proficiency. It becomes evident that the dominance of English is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but is intertwined with broader sociocultural norms and aspirations.

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the impact of language exposure, particularly through media, advertising, and education, on L1 proficiency erosion. The participants described how the prevalence of English content in these domains has led to a gradual decline in their L1 vocabulary and complexity. This parallels previous research on input-based theories of language acquisition, such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), emphasizing the critical role of exposure in language development.

The findings underscore the need to consider not only the quantity but also the quality of language exposure in understanding L1 attrition.

The narratives of the participants revealed a complex negotiation of language identity in the face of societal expectations. While acknowledging the practical advantages of English proficiency, many participants expressed a deep connection to their L1 and a desire to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage. This intricate interplay between individual agency and societal norms aligns with Norton's (2000) theory of identity and language learning. The participants' stories highlight the multifaceted nature of language identity, shaped by factors beyond linguistic proficiency.

The interviews provided insights into the participants' bilingual competence across different domains of language use. While some reported an enhancement of their English skills, others lamented a decline in their L1 proficiency. This mirrors Cummins' (1979) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The prevalence of English in formal and academic settings may foster BICS in English but potentially undermine CALP in the native language. This underscores the intricate nature of bilingual development and attrition across varied contexts.

The findings hold significant implications for language education and policy in L1-dominant environments. The pressure to prioritize English proficiency necessitates a balanced approach that values both languages and recognizes their distinct contributions. Language educators and policymakers have a pivotal role in fostering bilingualism by creating inclusive spaces that validate the participants' L1 and provide opportunities for meaningful language use. Strategies such as translanguaging, which encourages fluid movement between languages (García & Wei, 2014), can facilitate a more holistic and culturally responsive language education.

While the study sheds light on various aspects of L1 attrition, certain limitations warrant consideration. The sample primarily consisted of ESL undergraduate students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader age groups or linguistic backgrounds. Future research could encompass a more diverse participant pool to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives. Additionally, adopting a longitudinal approach could provide insights into the temporal trajectory of L1 attrition and its interaction with changing sociocultural dynamics.

In essence, the discussion of the semi-structured interview data underscores the intricate interplay between societal pressures, language exposure, and individual agency in shaping L1 attrition among ESL undergraduate students in an L1-dominant environment. The findings illuminate the necessity of a balanced language policy that upholds the value of both languages and recognizes the complex landscape of language identity and proficiency. This study contributes substantively to the ongoing discourse on language attrition, offering insights that inform language education, policy formulation, and chart a path for future research endeavors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The insights gathered from this study shed light on the intricate interplay between L2 proficiency and L1 attrition among undergraduate ESL learners in a predominantly L1-dominant environment. As this research delves into the social and cultural factors influencing language choices and their subsequent impact on participants' L1, Urdu, several practical suggestions and implications emerge:

- 1) The findings underscore the significance of promoting bilingualism within educational institutions. To counterbalance the societal pressure to prioritize English, universities could consider incorporating bilingual education approaches. This may involve offering courses that encourage the use of both languages for academic purposes, providing language exchange programs, and creating environments where students can fluidly switch between languages as needed.

- 2) Raising awareness about the cultural and cognitive advantages of maintaining proficiency in both languages is pivotal. Educational institutions, families, and society at large can collaborate to organize workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns that emphasize the importance of preserving linguistic diversity. By highlighting the advantages of being proficient in both L1 and English, this effort can help dispel the misconception that English alone defines success.
- 3) The study underscores the need for educational curricula that celebrate linguistic diversity. Introducing culturally relevant materials and incorporating language-rich activities that allow students to engage with their L1 can foster a positive attitude towards maintaining their mother tongue. This approach also integrates language and culture, enhancing students' linguistic and cultural competence simultaneously.
- 4) Creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable using their L1 can significantly impact their language choices. Faculty members and peers should be educated about the challenges ESL learners face and encouraged to embrace linguistic diversity. This will help alleviate the pressure students often feel to conform to using only English, fostering an environment where both languages are respected.
- 5) Encouraging students to engage in cultural exchange and language exposure can enhance their language maintenance efforts. Opportunities to interact with peers from different linguistic backgrounds and exposure to a variety of languages can reinforce the value of their L1. Additionally, events and activities that celebrate various languages and cultures can help students appreciate the richness of linguistic diversity.
- 6) This study paves the way for future research endeavors. Exploring the efficacy of language intervention programs aimed at mitigating L1 attrition and further investigating the role of peer influence and family dynamics on language choices could provide deeper insights. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking language attitudes and usage patterns over time can offer a comprehensive understanding of language dynamics among ESL learners.

In conclusion, this study's findings illuminate the intricate relationship between L2 proficiency and L1 attrition, highlighting the importance of understanding the social and cultural factors that influence language choices. The suggested strategies and implications provide practical guidance to educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to create an inclusive environment that nurtures linguistic diversity. By embracing bilingualism and fostering an appreciation for both languages, educational institutions and society can empower ESL learners to develop strong language skills and maintain a deep connection to their cultural heritage.

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Conflict of Interest

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