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RURAL-ETHNIC IDENTITIES & STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMME IN A PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITY OF PAKISTAN

Abstract

This study examines the learning experiences of students belonging to rural areas in English as Second Language (ESL) at a public sector university of Pakistan. The aim is to understand how students' rural-ethnic identities affect their learning. With an interpretivist epistemological stance, qualitative approach has been used to collect and analysis data. Twenty students and four teachers were purposively sampled for in depth interviewed and observations. The findings suggest that students' rural-ethnic identities as 'villagers' conflict with certain units of ESL course, particularly those which are based on exclusively urban context; however, other units which are set in rural contexts complement students' these identities. In the later case, students from rural backgrounds demonstrated a high level of interest and motivation; and their familiarity with the rural context led them to participate enthusiastically and confidently in class discussions and writing tasks. It is also found that students foreground their rural-ethnic identities when interacting with peers and teachers in ESL classes. Their rural-ethnic identities often conflict with the identities of peers and teachers, which significantly impact on these students' participation in the ESL classes, and so their overall learning experiences on the ESL programme.

Keywords: Rural-ethnic identities; students' experiences; ESL; higher education; Pakistan

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Introduction

According to the latest education policy (i.e., Ministry of Education, 2009), the Pakistani government aims to produce communicatively competent English speakers in order to meet the demands and challenges of the higher education, as well as the local and global job markets in a rapidly evolving world. This is reflected by the large budget allocated by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) for the research, planning and implementation of English language teaching reforms in the country (Shamim, 2010). Among many other initiatives, revised ESL courses were introduced in 2006, which run simultaneously with other educational programmes and are taught as minor subjects for the first two years (four semesters) to all the undergraduate students at almost all the public sector universities of Pakistan. The courses of the programme are mainly based on two books: (1) 'English for Undergraduates' by D. H. Howe, T. A. Kirkpatrick, & D. L. Kirkpatrick, and (2) 'Oxford Practice Grammar' by John Eastwood. The purpose of the programme is to improve students' English language skills, in order to ensure that students can cope with the demands of higher education, with specific objectives focusing on strengthening students' writing, reading, speaking, listening and grammar skills. More general objectives include building students' confidence by providing them with opportunities to interact in the classrooms without any gender, racial or ethnic bias, and making their language learning experiences enjoyable and productive (Curriculum for English, 2008). Many studies have been conducted to understand different dimensions of the ESL programme, including the need of the programme (Shahriar, 2011), curriculum (Shahriar, Pathan and Sohail, 2013), assessment and learning space (Bughio, 2013), teachers' and students' motivation (Pathan, 2012), interaction of programme with students of different educational background

(Shahriar, 2012), students' attitude towards reading (Memon, 2014), students' language learning anxieties (Gopang, Bughio and Pathan, 2015). Some research studies used sociological concept of identities, and analysed the interaction of students' gender identities with ESL programme (Rind, 2015), interaction of students' disciplinary identities with ESL programme (Rind and Alhawsawi, 2013). This study attempts to analyse the interaction of students' rural-ethnic identities with the ESL programme. The aim is to understand the ESL programme from the perspective of students who belong to a particular ethnic background and lived in rural areas to examine the extent to which the ESL programme offers them opportunities to interact with teachers and students without any ethnic and geographic biases.

Why focusing on students from rural areas?

Sindh is the second highly populated province of Pakistan, with more than 55 million people living in urban (45%) and rural (55%) areas (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2014). However, it has only 56% literacy rate, with more than 70% literate people living in urban areas. Whereas, the literacy rate of rural areas is less than 30% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2014). This is mainly due to the dire conditions of education in rural areas. Most of the villages have one-room primary schools with unqualified untrained teachers. Most of the students have to travel miles to get in secondary and higher secondary schools. Regional language is mostly used as medium of instruction in these schools. English is taught using old traditional grammar translation method. Students usually use rote learning to pass exams. They usually do not have any practical exposure that promotes their English speaking and listening skills. Their exposure limits further due to their limited mobility. They get their intermediate level education in the schools/colleges which are located in the proximity of their villages, and only travel to cities for further education, as there

aren't any universities at the rural areas of Sindh. Considering that the medium of instruction for all the universities in Sindh is English, it is expected that these students from rural areas may find it difficult to cope with the demands of the study. Moreover, these students may find it difficult to interact with the students of other ethnicities and/or the students of same ethnicities from urban areas. This study aims to explore these dilemmas of students from rural areas in the context of ESL programme using the concepts of ethnic-rural identities.

Conceptualising Identity

Several researchers have asserted that in almost all ESL teaching situations, teachers and researchers do not simply deal with language, or with learners and their cognitive and affective characteristics, but also take into account the relational aspects of ESL learning (Arnold, 1999; Jackson, 2008; Parkinson & Crouch, 2011). Arnold (1999, p.18) argues that ESL learning and use is a transactional process, which he defines as an act of reaching out beyond the self to others. As such, it is intimately connected with learner's emotional self. The way in which individuals consider 'who they are' is significantly formed by their social identity, or 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or her] membership in a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfeld, 1978, p.63).

A social perspective on ESL highlights the fact that learners are not anchored to a fixed state, but are conditioned by social forces which affect their sense of self (Arnold, 1999). This conceptualisation of the self begins with an assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society (Stryker, 1980). Stets & Burke (2005) elaborate this concept further saying that 'the Self influences society through the actions of individuals

thereby creating groups, organizations, networks, and institutions. And, reciprocally, society influences the self through its shared language and meanings that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect upon oneself as an object' (p. 128). Based on this understanding that the self emerges in and is reflective of society, Brewer (2001) argues that a social understanding of the self means that the society in which the self is acting must also be understood. Moreover, the idea that the self is always acting in a social context in which other selves exist must be taken into consideration.

A review of the literature suggests that the concept of self and identity has been adopted in numerous ways in the social sciences. According to the traditional symbolic interactionist perspective, known as the situational approach to self and society, society is viewed as constantly in the process of being created through the interpretations and definitions of actors in particular situations (Blumer, 1969). Individuals identify the factors which need to be considered for themselves, act on the basis of these identifications, and attempt to fit their lines of action with others in particular situations to accomplish their goals. From this perspective, it is assumed that individuals can freely define situations, which means that society is always thought to be in a state of flux with no real organization or structure (Stets & Burke, 2005, p.129).

By contrast, the structural approach does not see society as tentatively shaped (Stryker, 1980), but assume that society is stable and durable, as reflected in the 'patterned regularities that characterize most human action' (Stryker, 1980, p. 65). These contradictory approaches nevertheless share the notion that identity is embedded in social interactions; while the former perspective overemphasises individual agency, the latter questions individuals' capacity to make choices.

In the present study, the notion of identity is understood as individuals' perception of how they see themselves and others, and how others see them. This perception is established when individuals interact with one another in different situations. Their perception of self and others give them a sense of belonging to particular group(s), and they assume certain roles accordingly. Individuals' perception of self and others is understood in terms of the extent to which it is shaped by structure, but also the extent to which agents can exercise choice and agency in constructing their perception of self and others. Identity is also used to refer to multiple, contradictory and contested understandings of self and others in relation to agencies.

Rural-ethnic identities

Arnold et al. (2007) maintain that a key obstacle to developing policy for rural schools is the definition of 'rural' itself. It has been defined in reference to a set of characteristics, including lower socioeconomic status, lower educational levels, higher proportions of indigenous people, specific occupational health and safety risks, a relatively close relationship with nature, specific cultural attitudes, poor access to services and smaller population centres. Waldorf (2007) argues that being 'rural' as opposed to 'urban' is an attribute easily attached to individuals who have limited access to resources, of lower economic status, and who are poorly educated.

A number of studies link the concept of rurality with identity. These studies have used different dimensions, including discourses of rurality to construct new rural identities (Halfacree et al. 2002; Svendsen 2002; Svendsen 2004), gender and rural identity (Shorthall and Byrne 2009), and cultural heritage and rural identities (Ching and Creed 1997). The notion of rurality has

been used differently in all of these studies. In fact, these studies suggest that rurality is a context-specific notion, which has different meanings to agents in various contexts. Similarly, rural identities constructed in various contexts have different connotations for agents as well. For example, in Denmark, villages in rural areas have been seen as places where ideal societies can be established, and rural people feel proud of their rural identities (Svendson 2004). Likewise, Shorthall and Byrre (2009) characterises rural Ireland as a context in which women have greater power and authority than elsewhere.

However, in the context of Pakistan (and particularly in the Sindh), rurality and village life are associated with poverty (Baulch 2002), poor education (Sawada and Lokshin 1999; The Daily Observer 2009), and a lack of facilities and resources (Freeman 1982). More importantly, rurality is characterised by the class divisions of the feudal landlord vs. the agricultural labourers (Naimullah 2003). The feudal system has prevailed in the Sindh for centuries (Herring 1979), and has two key characteristics. Firstly, agricultural labourers are bind themselves to Zamidars (feudal lords) in order to receive a loan for a limited period; until that period is complete (and often even beyond this), these labourers are treated as bonded serfs. Secondly, Zamidars block any external interventions which could improve the labourers' quality of life, or help them to escape or challenge the Zamidars' authority. The education system in the province is the most notable victim of this, as the Zamidars have blocked any attempts to improve the quality of education provision in the rural villages of the Sindh (Qazi 2004). Being 'rural' in the Sindh is therefore characterised by a low socio-economic status, and being poorly educated, oppressed and lacking confidence.

Rurality in the Sindh is also tied to ethnicity. Most of the rural villages of Sindh are populated by Sindhis (Census 1998), and

there are very few multi-ethnic villages as geographic communities usually share the same language (Tropman et al. 2000). These aspects of rurality in the Sindh are all highly pertinent to the current study; as they not only highlight factors which may motivate students to access higher education and study English, but may also negatively affect their participation in the classroom.

Methodology

With an epistemological interpretivist stance, and using a qualitative case research approach, this study examines the experiences of students studying in a public sector university of Pakistan. A questionnaire was administered among three hundred students to get their background information for the purpose of sampling. Twenty students were purposively sampled from three hundred for an in depth study. These students belong to different ethnic groups and lived most of their lives in the rural areas of Sindh, belong to lower mid and lower class families, aged between nineteen to twenty two years, and studied in the fourth semester of the four-year Bachelor programme at the time of the study. These students were given codes (i.e., SM1: S refers to student, M refers to his gender as male, and 1 refers to the number of student). These students were interviewed and observed several times for an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Each student was interviewed twice, before and after observation. Two students were interviewed three times as per the need of emerging themes. The interviews lasted on average fifty minutes. Moreover, four teachers were also interviewed so that their voice may be added to this study. All interviews were conducted in regional language, tape recorded, translated, and transcribed. As interpretivist, we believe that in order to understand an individual's behaviour one should attempt to view the world from that individual's viewpoint. The job of researchers is to

obtain access to the individual's context in order to interpret their reality from their point of view. Within an interpretive framework, the researchers try to make sense of what they are researching. Bryman (2015) calls this process as double hermeneutic in that conducting social research; both the subject (the researchers) and the object (other participants in the study) bear the same characteristic of being interpreters or sense seekers. This means that researchers have to understand how participants view their reality, but at the same time understand what they make out of participants' reality and how they define their findings in the light of existing literature. With this approach, we developed our arguments on the responses of research participants reinforced by existing literature. Since participants responded in regional language, great care was taken to translate their responses in a way that maintains the natural quality of their contributions. The data from interview (and observations) was compiled into themes using NVIVO 9.

While we subscribe to the view that it is important to talk to students in order to understand their realities, we also acknowledge that students may not be able to express their views about many aspects and issues within an interview context for numerous reasons. This meant that it was particularly important to observe students and their worlds; however, these observations were evidently subjective. This adds a further issue for consideration, namely the ability to witness first-hand the behaviours and activities described by participants in interviews. This was achieved through active and non-participant participation with students and teachers in the research context. Active participation involved conducting classes and taking part in the class activities, while examples of non-participant participation include sitting in classrooms, observing student groups and being present during teachers' informal meetings. Through these different forms of participation, we aimed to

observe and experience the research context as a participant, while still acting as an observer focused on understanding, analysis and explanation. The observations were mainly used for three purposes: firstly, to understand the institutional context in general, and the ESL context in particular; secondly, to understand and explore the sensitive issues that participants were uncomfortable to discuss in interviews; and thirdly to verify interviewees' certain responses and claims.

It is important to mention that we have got access to students, teachers, classrooms, and even teachers' common rooms by the virtue of our positionality in relation to this study. In conducting this study, we see ourselves as, what Jahanbakhsh (1996) called, an ex-insider, who had been involved in teaching ESL programme at that institution. Thus, on the one hand, it gives us an opportunity to easily involve with teachers, who once were colleagues. On the other hand, it raises the issue of power relations in conducting interviews with students who might see us as insider. In such situations, maintain Bryman (2015), respondents usually say what the researcher (as the insider) wants to listen rather expressing their honest opinion. This situation was avoided by creating a friendly atmosphere to make respondents feel comfortable and assuring them that their identities and responses will be kept anonymous.

Finding & Discussion

This section examines the interaction of students' rural-ethnic identities with different aspects of the ESL programme, and the effects of these interactions on their learning experiences. In particular, this analysis aims to understand how students' rural-ethnic identities limit their participation and affect their membership in the ESL classes.

As discussed earlier, a rural-ethnic identity in a Sindhi context usually denotes a villager who lacks confidence and is oppressed,

poorly educated, and of lower social status. Contrary to these assumed characteristics, however, several students from rural villages participating in this study demonstrated considerable motivation when studying on the ESL programme. Learning English is a particular priority of these students, as it is an educational accomplishment which can distinguish them from uneducated people in rural areas, and moreover, can prepare them to participate in urban society. These aspirations lead to a high level of interest and hard work from these students on the ESL programme; however, in spite of this personal motivation, their rural-ethnic identities often worked against them. When interacting with the ESL programme, their rural-ethnic identities were often foreground, and this significantly affected their ESL learning experiences.

SM3 is one the students who struggled with his rural-ethnic identity. He was struggling to maintain his place as active intelligent student at the university by working hard on his English language skills, and practised English whenever he could. SM3 in fact approached us himself to be interviewed for the current study, and was emphatic that the conversation should take place in English (although we often had to use Sindhi instead). His enthusiasm to practise his English language skills at every opportunity was apparent.

SM3 revealed that he considers university education to be an important opportunity to gain confidence and success. In order to attract teachers' attention, he always sat at the front of the class; unlike other students from villages, he was always well-dressed. In particular, he always wore a tie, which he saw as an identity marker for students who wanted to be viewed as particularly studious. In spite of his efforts, however, SM3 admitted that he faced many problems related to his rural-ethnic identity, which was associated with being poorly educated. His English language skills (and listening and speaking in particular) were very weak,

which seemed to be a result of his vernacular-medium education and his consequent lack of exposure to English in the past. He told us that due to his weak listening skills, he often struggled to understand what teachers were saying, and to decipher their accent:

[...] teachers' speaking fluency and accent is strange and not consistent [...]. Some teachers are very fast while they speak. And personally speaking being a villager and educated in a village school where we have no teachers speaking in English, I sometimes don't understand them when they speak so fast. And sometimes their accent is not English... it's strange...it's different [...]

Most of the ESL teachers did not realise that students, and particularly those who have studied in rural vernacular-medium schools, struggled to understand their instructions in English. This may also be due to the fact that these teachers attempted to speak in American/British accent, but in reality remain closer to 'Pakistani English' (Rahman 1996). This means that teachers not only mispronounce certain words when trying to recreate an American/British accent, but they also speak too quickly to convey the fluency of their speech. These linguistic quirks, combined with teachers' use of poetic expressions from English literature (in an attempt at 'elegant' speech), mean that all students struggle to understand them when they speak English, and weak listeners such as SM3 all the more so. Most of the students from rural villages we interviewed lack the confidence to voice their concerns to teachers, so many continue to struggle in silence. However, some teachers do realise students' difficulties during one-to-one interactions. For example, TF1 realised that her English instructions were unclear to most of the rural students when she was confronted with one such student in her class:

[...] In the beginning, I didn't realise that [some] students don't understand my accent and can't cope my speed. When I am very fluent, they don't understand my English [instructions], because they have never had teachers in their village schools who have spoken in English. So, it is difficult for these students. I come to know that when I instructed students about a topic in a class and asked them to write a paragraph on it. In the end of the task, I asked a student if he wrote the paragraph. He said that he did it, but when I checked his copy he didn't write a word. When I

asked the reason, he said he didn't understand my instructions in English because I spoke fast [...]. You know we have limited class time, so sometimes we have to talk fast but it is problematic for these students [...]

Notably, TF1 only noticed this particular student because he sat at the back of the classroom, and mostly remained silent during her lessons. Unlike SM3, most of students from rural backgrounds tend to sit at the back of the class; since they do not understand teachers' instructions, they avoid participating in classes. Another reason for their lack of participation in class is their 'Sindlish' accent (speaking English in Sindhi accent), and the particular pronunciation of certain words associated with this. Their accent and pronunciation mark these students as belonging to certain rural-ethnic group, and leads to them being ridiculed in by others students of same ethnic group (Sindhi speakers of urban areas) as well as other ethnic groups (Mohajirs of urban areas) in class.

These students are usually labelled as 'villagers' as soon as they speak in classes, and in some cases, they are even criticised by teachers, who refer to them as villagers. Consequently, most of the students from rural villages remain silent in the classes. Marked by their accent and pronunciation, these students are left with a sense of inferiority and exclusion from the community of the ESL class. SF2, a Sindhi speaker of urban Hyderabad, described this as:

[...] they are Sindhis and they come from villages specially. They are not confident in the classes because there is a touch of their mother tongue in their English. So, whenever they speak, they are mocked or when they speak everybody laugh at them. So, they try to remain silent. I mean they are discouraged [to participate]

Aside from their accent and pronunciation, another reason students from rural backgrounds do not participate in class is due to their limited contextual knowledge of units in their textbook (Howe et al. 2006). Units in Howe et al. (2006) are mostly based on a Western, urban context, drawing examples from American and British culture in particular. For example, Unit One is based around traffic problems for residents of beach road, Unit Two is based on the use of technology in domestic work, Unit Three is

based on wild animals such as gorillas (which are not found in Pakistan), and so on. Students from urban areas are usually familiar with these examples, usually because they have studied in English-medium schools, where books originally written for Western schools are used. These texts therefore socialize students into English-speaking Western cultures from an early age. Moreover, students from urban backgrounds use the internet and watch foreign television channels via satellite dishes.

By contrast, students from rural villages have limited exposure to the world beyond their villages. The poor education in vernacular-medium schools and a lack of access to electronic media (including the internet) further limit their knowledge of the world. During class discussions around these units, students from rural areas therefore have very little to say. For example, during a discussion on Unit One, SM4 had little to contribute. Having been born and raised in a small village where only a few affluent families and feudal lords have vehicles, he had never witnessed traffic problems; indeed, there were no proper roads in his areas. Similarly, SM16 had lived exclusively in a remote, deserted village (Tharparkar), in a house with hardly any electronic equipment for the domestic use. Neither he nor any of his family members had ever used a microwave oven or vacuum cleaner. This lack of contextual knowledge meant that he was reluctant to take part in the discussion generated by Unit Two.

SM4 and SM16 were notably very enthusiastic as students, and were always willing to take part in any activity. However, their rural backgrounds meant that their knowledge of contexts discussed in class was limited, and so they could not participate fully (or at all) in these discussions. However, more familiar subject matter, such as a unit called 'Pirani' (Howe et al. 2006:177), did enable these students to participate in class discussion. This unit is set in a village, and focuses on the culture and life of

villages in Sindh. SM4 expressed his intense interest in this unit, as it complements his rural-ethnic identity:

I like the story of Pirani a lot in that section [...] It's very close to real life, the life which we were accustomed to at villages. It talks about the injustice that is there. The settings are familiar. It shows the culture of Sindh. So, I really feel that I know it very well [...]. Since I know the context very well, I can easily write about it and I can easily talk about it [...]. Teacher initiated a discussion [in the class in the context of this story], and I remember I participated with more confidence because I knew these things more than those who are from cities. So, I really enjoyed this unit

This unit therefore provided SM4 and other students from rural areas with an opportunity to improve their English language speaking skills by taking part in the discussion. SM4 participated with more confidence due to his familiarity with the contextual and cultural setting of the story, and he had many opinions and personal experiences to share. The story of 'Pirani' provided SM4 with a rare opportunity to participate in the community of ESL class, and moreover, to gain some legitimacy in the community.

Conclusion

This study, like many other studies (i.e., Rind 2015, Rind and Alhawsawi, 2013) highlights the importance of the diverse ways in which students' learning experiences on the ESL programme are shaped by their various identities, in this case ethnic-rural identities. The study reinforces the idea that students as social agents with multiple identities, and these multiple identities intersect and overlap when interacting with different aspects of ESL programme (Rind 2016). Students' identities are also socially structured, and can act to limit choices of action and interaction. However, some students seemed to challenge their socially structured identities. Against certain social norms, students were found to exercise their choice and agency when constructing these identities to a certain extent.

Overall, students' rural-ethnic identities as 'villagers' were found to conflict with certain units in the Book 1 of ESL (i.e., 'English for Undergraduates'). In particular, the units which were based on

exclusively urban context, are unfamiliar to students from rural backgrounds. When interacting with these units, students from rural areas therefore felt isolated, and had little to contribute to class discussion. However, students' rural-ethnic identities as villagers also complimented certain units (for example, Howe et al. 2006:177) which were set in rural contexts. Students from rural backgrounds demonstrated a high level of interest and motivation when interacting with these units; and their familiarity with the rural context led them to participate enthusiastically and confidently in class discussions and writing tasks. The study also presented empirical evidence which suggested that students foreground their rural-ethnic identities when interacting with peers and teachers in ESL classes. Their rural-ethnic identities often conflict with the identities of peers and teachers, which significantly impact on these students' participation and membership in the ESL community, and so their overall learning experiences on the ESL programme. Students' rural-ethnic identities were found to affect their interactions with peers and teachers for two main reasons. Firstly, as villagers, they were perceived to have poor educational backgrounds and limited English language skills. Peers mocked their 'Sindhish' accent, which in turn discouraged these students from participating in class. Secondly, teachers occasionally berated these students by referring to their identities as villagers, which was marked by their struggle to understand teachers' accents and talking speech. This once again meant that students from rural backgrounds avoided participating in class, and usually sat on the back-benches. Their lack of confidence and teachers' unsympathetic attitudes further meant that these students avoided interacting with teachers. Consequently, teachers did not devote much attention to students from rural backgrounds, either choosing to ignore them or showing frustration with them for failing to understand lectures. Rather than addressing rural students' problems, teachers instead ignore, insult or embarrass them

during classes; these students are therefore unlikely to be able to improve their English language skills.

Overall, this paper highlights the importance of students' identities and different roles associated with these identities in shaping their learning experiences in the ESL. Although only a selected section of findings are reported, this paper argues that students should not be treated on the basis of a unitary identity as learners while making important decisions like course designing, teachers' trainings and policy making. Students are the product of society with multiple identities. When they come into the class, they bring these identities with them. Teachers, course designers, and policy makers should be aware of the students and their multiple identities. They should know what aspects of an educational programme may conflict or complement with students' different identities. This awareness helps in reducing students' distress and helping in increasing their interest in the programme. The knowledge of students' social identities also helps in introducing attractive material that are empowering, teaching approaches that concord student of different backgrounds to participate in the class, and policies that facilitate and encourage students' learning.

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