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ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE: GRADUATE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF ENGLISH SPREAD, POWER, AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC ROLE IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

English has established itself as the world's hegemonic language. It shapes how people communicate across education, business, science, and technology. The current study explores graduate students' perceptions of English as a global language. Furthermore, it focuses on its spread, symbolic power, and sociolinguistic implications in Pakistan. In contexts like Pakistan, its presence is deeply felt not only in classrooms and workplaces but also in everyday life, where it holds access to knowledge, opportunity, and social mobility.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, where semi-structured interviews are conducted with 40 graduate students from diverse academic backgrounds at the University of Sindh and Mehran. The findings indicate that participants view English as central to global communication and strongly associated with modern technological development. It is specifically associated with fields such as science, artificial intelligence, and digital communication.

At the same time, students associate English with colonial history. They suggest it as a legacy of British imperial rule that continues to reflect institutional authority, elite status, and social hierarchy. Despite this, English is also widely seen as an opening to global opportunities, enabling access to education, employment, and international mobility. Therefore, this study highlights the dual nature of English as both an empowering resource and a mechanism of exclusion. It contributes to ongoing discussions on linguistic inequality, globalization, and postcolonial language dynamics, with implications for language policy and education in multilingual societies.

Keywords: *English as a global language, linguistic hegemony, Pakistan, globalization, higher education, qualitative research*

1. Introduction

English has become the dominant global language, functioning as a lingua franca across diverse sociocultural and professional contexts (El Garras, 2025). Its spread is closely linked to historical processes such as colonialism and contemporary powers, including globalization, digitalization, and international mobility (Manan, David, & Dumanig, 2017; Zeng & Yang, 2024). In postcolonial societies like Pakistan, English occupies a complex and often contested position, serving both as a medium of global participation and as a marker of social inequality.

In Pakistan, English is widely used in higher education, governance, law, and professional domains (Rehman, 2010). He further noted that access to English proficiency remains uneven. Similarly, this creates a linguistic divide between elite and non-elite populations (Pennycook, 2017; Rehman, 2002). While English provides access to global knowledge and opportunities, it also reinforces existing hierarchies.

This study aims to explore graduate students' perceptions of English as a global language. Specifically, it examines how students conceptualize their dominance, how they associate English with power and prestige, and how they view its role in everyday life. By focusing on learners' perspectives, this study contributes to understanding the lived realities of linguistic globalization in a postcolonial context.

Based on it, the research questions are:

1. How do graduate students in Pakistan perceive English as a global language in terms of its spread, power, and sociolinguistic role?
2. What meanings do students associate with English in relation to colonial history and symbolic power?
3. How do students interpret the dual role of English as both an empowering tool and a source of social inequality?

2. Literature Review

English is now widely used for communication across national, linguistic, and educational boundaries, as well as playing a role in business and technology (Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2011). It plays a central role in academic publishing and knowledge production, where a large proportion of global research is written and disseminated in English. It also significantly influences digital communication, online platforms, and emerging technologies, making it deeply embedded in contemporary global life (Zeng & Yang, 2024; LaSalle, 2026).

At the same time, postcolonial scholars remind us that English is not a neutral or purely functional language. Instead, it carries a strong ideological history shaped by colonial expansion. In many societies, especially former colonies, English is still associated with authority, governance, and institutional control. It often represents elite identity and access to better education and employment opportunities, while also reinforcing social and linguistic inequalities between those who have access to it and those who do not (Bagni, 2024; Zeng & Yang, 2024). In this sense, English operates both as a bridge to global mobility and as a marker of structural inequality in multilingual contexts.

The section below presents a critical review of the literature, exploring research questions and gaps. Furthermore, the study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives that explain the global spread, symbolic power, and sociopolitical role of English.

2.1. Linguistic Imperialism and Colonial Roots of English

The global spread of English is closely tied to colonial history and power relations. Robert Phillipson (1992) explains this through the idea of Linguistic imperialism. He argues that English did not simply spread naturally but expanded through colonial domination and continues to privilege certain groups while marginalizing others.

In Pakistan and other South Asian contexts, English still carries its colonial past. According to Rehman (2002; 2010), the spread of English is deeply rooted in British colonial history. Ahmed, S. J. (2011) also noted that the hegemony of English is political and founded in British colonial legacy. In postcolonial contexts, English often retains symbolic associations with authority, governance, and institutional power (Zeng & Yang, 2024). This phenomenon is often understood as linguistic hegemony, where language is used as a tool of dominance and control over local identities (Ali, 2025).

Furthermore, Rahman (2002, 2010) notes that English remains deeply embedded in higher education, government, and elite institutions, which creates unequal access based on language proficiency. In the same line, Ahmed (2011) highlights that English is often still associated with authority and institutional control due to its historical role in British governance.

From this perspective, English is not just a neutral tool for communication. It is also a reminder of

historical power structures that continue to shape present-day educational and social systems.

2.2 English as Linguistic Capital, and Social Advantage

Globalization and technological advancement have significantly benefited English. It has become the dominant language of the internet, artificial intelligence, and digital communication (Surenthiran et al., 2025). As digital platforms continue to grow, shaping English as a global knowledge production and dissemination.

Bourdieu's (1991) idea of linguistic capital in support of English and its social advantages explains that language is not only used to communicate but also acts as a form of social value that can open or close opportunities in life. In many societies, English has become a powerful form of symbolic capital. Bagni (2024) shows that people often associate English with better education, higher-status jobs, and social prestige. However, this also creates a divide: those who have access to English gain opportunities, while those without it may be left behind.

In Pakistan, this divide is very visible in education. Students in English-medium institutions often have more access to global opportunities compared to those studying in Urdu or regional-language systems. In this way, language becomes closely linked with social class and mobility.

2.3 Global Englishes: A More Flexible View of English

While earlier theories focus on inequality and power, newer perspectives offer a more flexible understanding of English. The Global Englishes approach suggests that English is no longer controlled by one country or one standard form.

Crystal, D (2003) explains that English has become a global lingua franca, used widely across countries for communication in education, business, and technology. However, Pennycook (2017) goes further by arguing that English is constantly reshaped by its users. People adapt it, mix it with local languages, and create new varieties depending on their cultural and social needs.

This perspective is important for multilingual contexts like Pakistan, where English is not used in a single fixed way but is shaped by local realities and practices.

2.4 English in Globalization and the Digital World

In today's globalized world, English plays an even more powerful role. It dominates academic publishing, scientific research, and digital communication. Seidlhofer (2011) explains that English has become the main language of international academic exchange.

More recent studies show that English is also deeply embedded in digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and global media systems (Zeng & Yang, 2024; Surenthiran et al., 2025). This means that English is not just a language anymore; it is also a gateway to knowledge, technology, and global participation.

At the same time, this poses a challenge: those without strong English skills may be excluded from important knowledge and opportunities in the digital age.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to understand how graduate students perceive English as a global language, particularly in relation to its spread and symbolic meaning. The methodology and design highlight the role of English through participants' voices in Pakistan. A qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for a deeper exploration of students' experiences and the meanings they attach to English in their academic, social, and professional lives.

3.2 Participants

The study included forty graduate students from two universities in Pakistan. Participants are selected purposefully to take a range of academic disciplines, including social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, medicine, and humanities. This diversity helped ensure that the findings reflect varied educational experiences rather than a single academic perspective.

All participants are multilingual, typically speaking Urdu along with one or more regional languages such as Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto, or Balochi. Most also had some level of English proficiency, which reflects the linguistic reality of higher education in Pakistan, where English plays a central role.

For many participants, English is not only a subject of study but also a daily academic requirement. It was commonly used in lectures, textbooks, assignments, examinations, and online learning platforms. Outside the classroom, students also encountered English in workplaces, social media, advertisements, and digital content.

Although their language backgrounds and academic fields varied, a clear pattern emerged across the group. Most participants viewed English as a global language that connects people across borders and opens access to education and career opportunities. At the same time, many also connected English to colonial history, describing it as a language associated with British rule, authority, and social prestige.

This combination of shared experiences and nuanced understandings makes the participants well-suited for exploring how English is viewed both as a practical global tool and as a symbol of power and inequality in Pakistan.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants took part voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews. Their identities were kept confidential, and any identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity. The data were used strictly for academic research purposes.

4. Findings and Analysis

The analysis of interviews with 40 graduate students shows four closely connected themes: First is 'English as a global means of communication'. The second is 'English as a symbol of colonial and institutional power'. Third is 'English as a marker of social mobility'. And fourth is 'elite identity, and English as part of everyday academic and social life'. The themes and analysis represent that 'What is striking is not only *what* students said, but also the consistency in how they positioned English within their lived experiences in Pakistan'.

The analysis according to themes is given in the following sections.

4.1 English as a Global Means of Communication

Most participants naturally described English as a global language that connects people across countries, cultures, and professions. For them, its global status comes from everyday usefulness rather than theory.

As Amrat explained:

"*English is a global language because it is widely used for international communication, education, business, and media*."

Rafiq similarly noted:

"*The English language is considered global because it is widely spoken all around the world*."

Other students reinforced this idea by focusing on its communicative role:

"*English is a global language because people from different countries use it to communicate with each other*." (Ruqia)

Taken together, these responses show that students see English as a practical bridge language, essential for navigating education, work, and digital spaces in an interconnected world.

4.2 English as a Symbol of Colonial and Institutional Power

Alongside its global role, many participants strongly linked English to colonial history and structures of authority. This theme appeared repeatedly and quite confidently in their responses.

One participant reflected:

"*English symbolizes royal power because it spread through British colonial rule and was the language of authority and administration.*" (Amrat)

Rafia expanded this idea further:

"*English became dominant in administrative, judicial, and military systems after the British Empire expanded*."

Similarly, Darakhshan added:

"*English is the language of the British monarchy and administration… it represents authority and governance*."

These reflections show that for many students, English is still emotionally and historically tied to colonial governance and institutional control, not just communication.

4.3 English as a Marker of Social Mobility and Elite Identity

A strong and recurring feeling among participants was that English is closely linked with status, education, and social advantage.

One participant stated clearly:

"*English is the language of the elite class; it is not the language of common people.*" (Kinza)

Another explained its importance in career progression:

"*English symbolizes power because it is required in education, the job market, and professional success.*" (Arain)

Others described it more generally as a sign of prestige:

"*To a great extent, English represents prestige, status, and influence in society.*" (Mahesar)

These responses suggest that English is not just a language in Pakistan. It is also perceived as a social divider and mobility tool, shaping who gains access to better opportunities.

4.4 English in Academic and Everyday Life

Participants also emphasized how deeply English is embedded in their daily academic and social environments. For many, it is not limited to classrooms but surrounds them constantly.

One participant described this clearly:

"*English is used as a medium of instruction in schools, colleges, universities, professional institutes, science and technology fields, and online education platforms.*" (Amrat)

Another added:

"*English is used in medicine, technology, social sciences, and many other fields as a medium of instruction.*" (Rafia)

Beyond formal education, students pointed to its everyday visibility:

"*We find English everywhere, in workplaces, universities, schools, and even homes through media like Netflix.*" (Langah)

Another participant noted:

"*English is found in schools, offices, advertisements, shopping malls, courts, and social media.*" (Shuhban)

These responses show that English has become part of the everyday linguistic environment, shaping both formal learning and informal life.

4.5 Key Results

When viewed together, the data show a clear but complex picture.

On one side, students see English as a necessary global tool, i.e., something that opens doors to education, communication, and opportunity. On the other side, they are very aware of its historical and social weight, linking it to colonial power, elite identity, and inequality.

In simple terms, English is experienced by students as both a gateway to global participation and a symbol of social and historical inequality

This dual understanding reflects the reality of English in Pakistan: it is at once empowering and limiting, depending on who uses it and in what context.

Table 1: Key Findings of The Participants' Responses

Participant	Response Summary (Global Language)	Symbolic Power (Royal/Colonial Meaning)	Medium of Instruction (Domains/Spaces)
Amrat	English is global due to international communication, education, business, and media	Linked to British colonial rule, authority, and administration	Schools, colleges, universities, professional institutes, science & technology, and online platforms
Rafiq	Widely spoken across the world and used in multiple fields	Language of sovereign authority; colonial administrative, judicial, and military dominance	Medicine, technology, social sciences, global education systems, and international universities

Participant	Response Summary (Global Language)	Symbolic Power (Royal/Colonial Meaning)	Medium of Instruction (Domains/Spaces)
Darakhshan	Lingua franca in education, administration, tourism, AI, and global superpowers	Language of the British monarchy, elite class, bureaucracy, and colonial governance	Schools, colleges, universities, coaching centers, and training institutes
Sehar	Global due to power dynamics	Controlled and globalized by powerful structures	Everywhere
Sajid	Widely spoken with a functional role	Language of court, education, and law	Education, trade, diplomacy, media
Langah	Everywhere, power dynamics	Common global language symbolizing royal power	Workplaces, universities, homes, Netflix/media
Irsa	Communication in education, business, and tech	Language of the British monarchy and authority	Schools, colleges, universities, online classes, workplace
Kinza	Historical, globalization, and education dominance	Elite language is associated with social class	Schools, workplaces
Lashary	Colonialism, global communication	Colonial influence and power	Educational institutions, business, and travel
Bushra	British rule, US influence	Language of the British rulers and administration	Schools, colleges, universities, and online learning
Lareb	Global acceptance and understanding	International prestige and symbolic power	Exams, products, ads, technology
Shuhban	Political stability, colonization, and tech	Language of governors and colonial rulers	Classrooms, media, courts, malls
Haiqa	British colonial history and trade	Imperialism and linguistic alienation	Schools, offices, judiciary, ads
Mahar	Higher education global dominance	Historical political prestige (changing over time)	Schools, universities, online platforms
Jaweria	Education, business, communication	British colonial power and modern prestige	Trade, education, jobs
Alizay	British colonization	British influence and power	Schools, colleges, universities
Darakhshan	Colonization, the education system spread	Royal family and colonial administration	Schools, universities, IELTS, TOEFL
Ashfaq	Colonialism and global use	Elite class language (kings, elites)	Schools, social media, and official use
Sameera	Colonial, globalization, and trade systems	Language of global power structures	Business, trade systems
Khairunnisa	British and American influence	Imperialism and cultural control	Schools, media, online courses
Mahesar	Education and business globalization	Prestige and institutional power	Schools, organizations

Participant	Response Summary (Global Language)	Symbolic Power (Royal/Colonial Meaning)	Medium of Instruction (Domains/Spaces)
Amrat	Communication and globalization	Authority and prestige	Schools, media, universities
Amna	Communication and travel	Language of rulers and elite	Billboards, hospitals, institutions
Arain	US dominance, job market	Skill-based power symbol	Schools, universities
Ruqia	Communication across linguistic groups	Global connector language	Schools, offices, airports
Mariam	Trade and tourism	Colonial + global connector	Social media, schools
Farheen	Lingua franca in communication	Opportunity bridge language	Schools, meetings
Javeria	Colonial and global hegemony	Colonial power symbol	Schools, hospitals
Maha	British colonization and business	Prestige and power language	Schools, universities
Ambreen	Communication language	International lingua franca	Universities, offices
Shifa	British Empire language	Law and administrative power	Schools, media
Saddam	Colonial, and a US superpower	Economic-technological dominance	Universities, IT, and aviation
TP Anwar	Writing system accessibility	Academic instruction	Universities
Naila	Colonization and US global power	Research and prestige language	Social media, research
Vani	Economic and political power	Imperial/monarchy symbol	Schools, military
Mariyam N.	British colonization	Authority and governance	Universities, airports
Heer	Historical and US dominance	Prestige is maintained in systems	Education, social media
Sapna	British and US influence	Colonial authority symbol	Schools, offices
Rubab	Colonization and US power	Elite education symbol	Schools, universities

Table 1 shows the responses of the participants who describe the spread of English, its use as a symbolic power across the world, as well as in Pakistan.

5. Discussion

This study shows that English in Pakistan is experienced in a deeply dual and sometimes contradictory way. On one hand, students clearly see English as an essential tool for global communication, education, and professional life. On the other hand, they also associate it with historical inequality, colonial power, and social stratification. These two perspectives exist side by side in students' everyday understandings of the language.

From a functional perspective, the findings confirm that English is widely viewed as a global

lingua franca, supporting communication across borders and disciplines. This aligns with Crystal (2003), who describes English as the primary language of international interaction in education, science, and technology. For students in this study, English is not an abstract concept but a practical necessity that connects them to academic resources, digital platforms, and career opportunities.

However, the study also reveals a strong awareness of the historical and political weight of English. Many participants clearly link English to colonial rule and institutional authority. This interpretation reflects the perspective of Phillipson (1992), who argues that English continues to function as a system of dominance shaped by colonial history. In the Pakistani context, students' responses show that English is still emotionally and symbolically tied to power structures such as administration, education, and governance.

At the same time, English is strongly associated with social mobility and elite identity. Students repeatedly described it as a marker of prestige and a gateway to better opportunities. This finding strongly resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, where language proficiency becomes a form of social and economic advantage. In Pakistan, English proficiency is often seen as a pathway to upward mobility, especially in competitive academic and professional environments. However, this also creates inequality, as access to quality English education is not evenly distributed across social classes.

Interestingly, students do not view English as a fixed or foreign system. Instead, they show signs of adoption and local appropriation, which aligns with the Global Englishes perspective. Pennycook (2017) argues that English is constantly reshaped by its users in different sociocultural contexts. Similarly, participants in this study describe English as something they actively use, modify, and integrate into their multilingual realities rather than simply adopting it in a rigid form.

Another important insight is the extent to which English is embedded in everyday academic and social life. It is not limited to classrooms or textbooks but extends to digital media, workplaces, and online platforms. This reflects the growing dominance of English in global knowledge systems and digital environments, as highlighted by Seidlhofer (2011) and Zeng & Yang (2024). For students, English is everywhere, i.e., it illustrates how they study, communicate, and engage with technology.

The findings suggest that English in Pakistan cannot be understood in simple terms of either empowerment or oppression. Instead, it operates as both simultaneously. It opens doors to global participation while also reinforcing existing social inequalities. This tension reflects the lived reality of English in postcolonial societies, where language is deeply connected to history, identity, and opportunity.

In this sense, the study contributes to ongoing debates by showing that learners are not passive recipients of English dominance. Rather, they actively interpret its meaning, negotiate its value, and position it within their own social and educational experiences.

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