

My Endless Passion for the English Language: A Life Story of a Punjabi Language  
Learner  
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My name is Syed Haseeb Sadiq. I hail from Kalarkahar (Punjab) a small village in the suburb of Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. I was borne there, grew up and studied at different institutions and got a bachelor degree in Engineering. I have been in the United States for the last three months doing my Master in Business Administration at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

My first language is Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. English is the official language, the language of governance, economy and education. Urdu was the language spoken around me, at home, at school and the society at large. I do not remember learning it. It just came to me naturally. It was the first language I came across and I think I just knew it. I gained consciousness with it and it was the language my parents communicated in. I was introduced to more specific grammatical details of Urdu in school. I can also interact in three other regional languages; Punjabi, Pashto and Hindku.

I was admitted to school when I was 5. The school was an English medium school as the curricula was taught in English. The local teachers were not well versed in English and I depended on my parents and family for my English language learning. My parents are educated, medical doctors by profession and quite fluent in English. Because of the family, I was introduced to English movies and books at an early age. My environment helped me a great deal to acquire the correct form of the English language. My contact with the western culture greatly motivated me to learn English. I have relatives in UK and the United States. Through interaction with them, watching television and movies and

reading English books, I was exposed to the western culture since my early childhood. The right foundations for language learning were laid at an early age. I started reading English books early and my father encouraged me to read more and more English as it was and is the only possible way to a successful career in Pakistan. As I said earlier that my parents are fluent in English but they did not talk to me and my siblings in English. They spoke in English when they were trying to teach us English. At other times it was not used as a language of communication. The language of communication at home and outside home was English. My parents provided us with nice books and encouraged us to watch English movies and play computer games for English language. My father gave me the quest for knowledge. Even though English is stressed in education and we have people who can interact in English, interaction in pure English is rare. It is always spoken interchangeably with other languages. We hear a few English sentences inserted in Urdu in educated societies. Although I could not and I did not interact in English at that time, but other skills like reading and writing were greatly strengthened. I did not speak the language inside the classroom during my school as it was not a requirement. Similarly I could not use it outside the classroom with my friends because it was not the norm. College was the place where probably I started speaking in English. I do not remember when I started speaking in the language, but it was the point when I innately and subconsciously started converting my thoughts into English. I started thinking in English and I used to speak in English when I would become angry. I used words which I came across while reading in my speaking. Whenever I would come across a new word, I would note or memorize it and then would look for opportunities to use it in my writing or speaking. This liking for the English language was due to my desire for good status in

society. I was always fascinated by English and I always wanted to speak it. I knew that if I could speak English fluently and articulately, I would be accepted in the high echelon of society in big cities. Good English language skills were necessary to move in the society of which I wanted to be a part. English is respected every where in Pakistan. Getting a good job and even a beautiful wife depends on English skills. It is a status symbol and one with good communication in English is welcomed in every circle of society. One can simply do wonders with English in Pakistan. I was from a small town and I knew that I had to learn English to move to a big town with many opportunities.

Even though the medium of instruction in school was English, the teachers themselves had no English education and their knowledge of the language was very limited. They tried their best to teach us the language but it was mostly incorrect and deficient. I corrected it by reading books and with help from my family. The teaching of English in the public schools in Pakistan is very traditional and uniformed. Courses are designed centrally and never up-to-dated for decades. The teaching methods are almost the same throughout the country. They started with the alphabets and moved to nouns. The same methods are still used without any change or research. Dictation was used for correct spellings. Then they taught us how to recognize and make sentences. Grammar was taught through translation from Urdu. Grammar was a compulsory and major part of our English courses in school. Translation was an important part of English language teaching and carried great weight in exams. The logic behind translation was that students think in their mother tongue and translation would facilitate making English sentences. This translation method was thought to be the transitory period in learning English for beginners. The practice continued for a long time and the transition never ended. The flip

side was that it became a permanent thinking process in most language learners. I followed the same method for some time. I had the intuitive knowledge of English due to my reading and I could easily translate sentences from Urdu into English. The translation method did not help me as I was already familiar with basic English sentence making. Translation may help in writing and reading but it seriously hinders speaking fluently. This approach is all pervasive in the education system and people believe in its efficacy. My solution for this complex solution is teaching by the native speakers of English.

The second major part of English language teaching was tenses. The same pattern was used through out schooling with slight variations. Speaking was totally ignored. As a result many students remained incapable speaking the English language. Studying the form was the focus and meanings were ignored. We used to remember essays and paragraphs like parrots without comprehension. In such a scenario students with strong memories were considered intelligent and good learners of the language. Again my circumstances came to my help when other students faced disappointment and frustration. I interacted with my family and relatives in English, watched English programs on TV and read English magazines and newspapers.

English language learning in our school is very bookish and teachers are supposed to follow books designed centrally. Teachers depend on these books because they themselves are deficient in the language. Teaching these books make their job easier. They only focus on reading and writing resulting in good reading and writing skills. It is only the speaking skill which is absolutely ignored. To make for this shortage, students rely on their own sources as I did. The irony is that most students want to learn how to

speak as it carries a certain prestige value. People who can speak English are given more respect prestige in society.

I was not satisfied with the way English was taught to us in schools. One area where I owe my success to my schooling was writing in the English language. I can write good essays in English and I scored well wherever writing skill was tested. But again it was not entirely in school and I supplemented my writing skill with other means at home. Same is the case with speaking as I acquired it through my own endeavors. Students, who do not have opportunities like me, suffer. They can read, write and may be understand another person speaking in English. When it comes to speaking, even university students remain unable to express themselves. The teaching methodologies were not effective and teachers did not teach the language the way they should have. They gave us the basics like some rules of grammar and then left us on our own to learn other skills. I remember memorizing whole essays by heart. The teacher would write those essays on the board, we noted them down in our note books and later on memorized them by heart. I did not write them on my own and I could not even understand the essays. We produced the same essays word by word in the exams. As a result students never developed the skill of writing essays as they were not allowed to use their own minds. My remedy for all these shortcomings in the English language teaching is that native speakers of English should teach the language. The effort would need a lot of resources but it is worth the resources. Students would be able to learn the language with ease and less wastage of energies. The generation of my parents had good English skills as they studied in schools and colleges manned by native English speakers. My parents have good English skills because they studied in a convent missionary school where English speakers from UK used to teach.

These schools were nationalized and closed in the 70s. It seems difficult at present but after the security situation is in control, native speakers of English can teach in Pakistan. It would bridge the gap between different countries and benefit the people of Pakistan in the acquisition of English. After the foundations are established, students at intermediate and advance levels can be taught by local teachers. Students would acquire correct pronunciation and grammar at an early age with the help of these native English teachers.

Another anomaly in the educational system in Pakistan is the dichotomy between public and private schools. Luckily my school was a private school and instruction in English started at an early age. The medium of instruction for all subjects was English. On the other hand, public schools introduce English at a very later stage. The medium of instruction is Urdu and English is taught a separate subject and that too at 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This dichotomy is due to the bad policies on the part of those who governed Pakistan after independence. They should not have allowed the existence of two parallel but different educational systems. As a result the children of the poor go to these public schools where they are subjected to a bad system of education. Public school educated students do not have the opportunities of private school students. People are refused jobs if they mention public schools in their resumes. Good jobs are offered to those with good command of the English language. Students with deficient English skills do not have prospects of a good future or successful careers in any field. Students face these injustices in the field of English language learning due to the lack of foresight on part of the policy makers. The majority of the population is illiterate. They do not have equal access to education. This leads to ambivalence and unawareness in the general public. They do not know about

their rights as citizen of the state. Similarly they do not know about their civic responsibilities and consequently remain unable to perform them.

I can see the class differences playing an important role in the acquisition of English. As I said, my circumstances helped me a lot to learn the language from the people around me. Speaking English is preferred and respected in high society in Pakistan. I was a part of such a society. It is a status symbol. No matter what your family background or financial position is, speaking English uplifts your status. Although speaking pure English is very rare, people use it interchangeably with Urdu. Urdu language is famous for its acceptance of words and structures from other languages. It is an amalgamation of many languages. It is the parent language of other languages in the subcontinent. The society where I was brought up used English interchangeably with Urdu and a person predominantly speaking English is given more respect. The quantity of English was still less and Urdu remained the medium of interaction sprinkled with English sentences here and there in our interaction as the area was mostly backward. People outside my home did not know even a single word of English. Even though the chances to interact in English outside home were rare, I depended on my home to supply me with chances and opportunities to practice and learn the language. Motivation can help a great deal in such frustrating situations. With proper will and motivation, even people in the villages without basic facilities can learn the language. I know many people from backward areas of Pakistan doing well in their lives. They made it possible by learning the language even in unfavorable environments.

As a parent who has been through the English language learning experience, I would like my kids to attend schools with English as the medium of instruction and up-to-date

curriculum. I would like the school to provide the best education that is to teach the child the basics of science, good English skills and awareness about civic duties and moral obligations.

The teaching of English changed to some extent during my middle school. In Pakistan we have a number of English medium institutions established by the British government in the colonial era. These institutions specifically focused on English language skills and prepared students for high civil and military positions. Most of these institutions were nationalized by the government of Pakistan. Those which remained independent still have good English language teaching standards. I was admitted to one of those prestigious schools, Abbottabad Public School and College, famous for its long history of teaching in the English medium. It was established in 1954 with a mission of preparing students for high positions with strong English language skills. The school is situated in a beautiful scenic area in the north of Pakistan. The environment was totally different from my primary school. The level of English was different. Students from all over Pakistan, from prestigious schools and good English language skills formed the student community of the schools. Teachers were properly trained and had good command of the English language. It gave me an opportunity to learn the language in a better way. It was an elite school and children of the rich studied there. There is a class oriented society in Pakistan segregated on economic statuses. Students in these schools speak English fluently because they have more contacts with the language because of their social status. Teachers were qualified and well versed in the English language compared to my primary school teachers. The environment, classmates, friends and teachers provided me with opportunities to test and increase my knowledge of English.

Even though the curriculum was the same as in other schools, my skills in English improved because of emphasize on English.

After the completion of my school, I got admission in a college in Rawalpindi, a city adjacent to Islamabad. Educational standards were not that high. As the college was prestigious and expensive, children of the rich formed the majority of the student community. These studied had good English skills because of their previous schooling. I got ample opportunities to speak with them in English. It was the first time that I started speaking English. My reading, writing and listening skills were quite developed, but I was not able to interact in English. I started with speaking a sentence of English followed by an Urdu sentence. I kept on adding English sentences to my speech and Urdu was becoming less and less. At college level, teachers were less bothered about the language. Subject matter was more important than the medium. Teachers variously preferred delivering lectures in Urdu or English. It did not matter for me then because I used English in interaction with my peers.

After graduation in 2004, I wanted to do my MBA. To be eligible for and MBA, I needed some work experience. I worked for two years and got admission in MBA at IUP. In the meantime, no significant change took place concerning my English language skills.

If I rank my skills in English according to my proficiency in a specific skill, I would rank reading first and the best. On the second number would be listening, followed by writing and lastly speaking. In my opinion the reason for differences in skills is due to the emphasize placed on these skills in the educational system. Secondly their introduction in different points of time in my life may have affected my proficiencies in these skills. As reading came first in the sequence, my reading skills are well developed. Moreover the

educational system is very reading oriented. Listening came second in the order. It was not active listening in the class or outside the class, but passive as I watched TV shows and English movies. Writing came next as it was a slow process and we were introduced to it very gradually. Speaking came last and that is the reason that it came at a very later stage. I think if I had started with speaking first, my speaking skill would have been more developed.

I had the opportunity to be taught English by sir Hewkeshphel, a famous name in the English language teaching circles in the subcontinent. He was bestowed with OB by the British Empire for his meritorious services in the field of English language teaching. Learning English from a native speaker was a totally different and more rewarding experience. It enriched my understanding of the language and motivated me to learn more of it. I would say that even though I gained something from my education in schools and colleges, but more need to be done. I think my personal efforts contributed to my English language learning. The educational system should be reformed to make English language learning accessible to all. English teachers should be trained and equipped with latest teaching methods in the English language. Improvements are needed to transform English learning into a more meaningful experience.

One good change which I feel was good for my English language was when I shifted to a superior school from an inferior school in terms of the medium of instruction. I do not know but this trend may also be here in the United States. Some private schools are very good when it comes to teaching generally and teaching English language specifically. English was stressed during our Junior High School and the emphasis declined as we moved ahead in our education. In college, English took a secondary place

and the stress was shifted to other subjects. It seemed that we had perfected our skills in the language. The reality was otherwise and we needed more teaching to advance our skills in English language. Our skills were deficient, even though I was at an advantage because of my environment. So we were forced to learn all language skills in the 7-8 years of our school. Even this time was enough if the language teaching system had been appropriate. Although there was a difference between the English taught at primary and high school levels, the contents of the course were the same. Grammar and translation repeated themselves again and again. English was taught as a compulsory subject in primary school because the medium was Urdu. Later on during my junior high school, English was a compulsory subject as well as other subjects were taught in English. I could not learn anything about the English language from school. I already knew what was being taught in the class. I was reading, writing, and listening to English on my own. I was always ahead of the class, so English teaching did not really help me. I would say that learning it was made possible by my personal efforts. Again my learning was motivated by my environment. I may have learned some bits of the language like some grammatical rules and a few words in school which were inconsequential to proper language learning. Many of my friends studied with me in the same institutions. We had similar teachers and textbooks. If my success had been due to the educational system, they would have been at par with me. My success with the English language was due to my environment and personal motivation. In the absence of a proper English teaching system, motivation can play an important role in acquisition. There are many success stories in our area where people have developed decent English language skills in the face of unfavorable circumstances.

In Pakistan professional colleges like medical, engineering and computer science offer course in English related to the field. I took English business communication as a compulsory course in my undergraduate professional studies. The course was about writing specifically and speaking generally in the business context. We were taught how to write business letters and reports in English. All presentation skills were strengthened during that course. The course was very practical and related to the real world. The course was only for one semester in a four years degree program and was given secondary importance. Other business related courses were given more weight even though those courses were taught through the medium of English. Almost everything beyond the primary school was in English. Instruction in English language and pure English courses declined with the passage of time. I think the approach should have been the other way round and more courses should have been offered in English to advance skills in the language. Another solution can be extensive focus on English in school years. Once the students have mastered the necessary skills, they can be exposed to other courses in the English language. When knowledge is accessible only through English, no one can gain expertise in a specific field without good English skills.

I owe my learning of English to my friends and classmates because we used to interact a lot in English. Secondly I would say my family played an important role in giving me an environment conducive to meaningful learning of the language. Thirdly the books provided to me by my parents proved to be a direct access to Standard English. My personal motivation to learn the language was always my guiding post. It worked for me in an environment which was apathetic to English language learning. I am not talking about my family environment, but the society outside which can play a big role in

language acquisition. Without personal motivation, even good schooling and other factors responsible for language learning would prove ineffective. For example students who have been taught Spanish during their schools, remain unable to speak the language because they do not have the motivation. Back in Pakistan, English is a compulsory subject in the curriculum. Students do not have a choice. Most students consider English a burden and try to stick to their own local languages. Somehow they feel that the English language is a difficult language and they would not be able to learn it no matter how much effort they put in. If it would have been out of choice, the standard of English language would have been high. At a later stage students realize that they can not move ahead in education without English. The educational system is not supportive of providing opportunities to students. The irony is that beyond school, everything is in English. In such a frustrating situation, only people who are motivated enough like me can make a difference. Those who remain deficient in their English language skills are thrown out of the race. They simply can not move ahead without English. English is the only way to success in any field.

I was motivated by the prestige value of English because English is a status symbol and people with good English skills are given more respect. Those who do not have access to it oppose it. They can not afford sending their kids to prestigious English medium institutions. The government should invest more in the public school system. English language learning should be affordable and open to all.

I have equal skills in English and I would think of myself as a versatile person when it comes to English language. Versatility in English language is my real strength. I have enough vocabulary and a reasonable command of grammar. I can write clearly and I

can read comprehensibly. I can speak fluently and understand native speakers of English easily. Learning speaking was the most difficult part of English language learning. This was due to the exclusion of speaking from the school curriculum and less opportunities to practice and learn the language on our own. Reading was the easiest as it was the primary focus of teaching at every level. It was the beginning and end of every English language class in the school and college. Speaking is difficult because you need confidence to speak even though you might have understanding of the language. Then you need to practice speaking the language often. Understanding the language, confidence and enough practice go hand in hand. When these three ingredients are there, you may have the ease to speak the language fluently. I am able to speak near fluently because I had a passion for the language. I developed an understanding of the language by reading books, watching media and interacting with friends and teachers. These preparations gave me enough confidence to speak the language.

I have been in the United States for the last three months. My traveling experience helped me a great deal. In such situations you are compelled to interact only in English. American English is quite simple, straightforward and practical for me. I had a different kind of experience of English. Back in Pakistan we use British English which is quite complex. Here in America I mix British and American pronunciations sometimes. I can understand American clearly. They have problems understanding me sometimes because of my accent. This misunderstanding is not due to speaking wrong English or pronouncing incorrectly. It is more because of a difference in dialect. For example Americans pronounce the word poor in a way which is quite distinct and different than ours. It is a matter of dialect because even two people from different parts of America

may not understand one another clearly. Speaking pure English without Urdu was weird for me because I was used to it for a long time. I have stopped converting Urdu sentences into English. Translation would affect my fluency and I would take a lot of pauses. Now I think in English and it has helped my fluency a great deal. Thinking in the target language is the only way to gain fluency. I think in English and utter my thoughts loudly in English.

Another hindrance to gain fluency is when we have a contrast between two cultures. Cultural differences lead to conceptual and linguistic differences. I did not feel that difference because I was exposed to the same culture and language for a long time. I watched English TV shows and movies. I read a great deal of English literature. As most of my learning came from the same American sources, I did not come across that linguistic gap which most learners find annoying. I noticed many changes in my speaking in the last three months. First I am gaining more fluency in speaking as I have to speak in English extensively with my teachers, classmates, and friends and with everyone I interact with. My accent is becoming more American. My pronunciation is going through a transition.

To make English language learning a more fulfilling experience in Pakistan, I would suggest that native speakers of English should teach kids in their early phase of language learning. Exchange programs may help a great deal in this regard. If American students attend Pakistani colleges and learn Urdu or any other language, it would benefit Pakistani students as well. Pakistani students after completion of their studies in the States can go back to Pakistan and guide others towards successful language learning.

I think second language learning is a never ending process and skills in the second language can never overtake the skills in the first language. First language comes naturally. When I compare my skills in Urdu and English, I don't see much difference. My reading and writing skills are better in English. My speaking skill in Urdu is of course better than English.

English language is important because it is the lingua franca of the world. Access to sciences and social sciences is possible through English. The use of computers, the latest technological marvel depends on English language. All standard systems in the world are in English. The world is becoming a global village and English is the language of that village. Interaction among countries and people of these countries is increasing each day. There is a need for a common language in the world and English can be that common language. It is playing the role of a bridge among nations. English is going to be the language of humanity and now the name should be changed to make it accommodative of others. There are American, British and Indian Englishes. English can exist with other regional languages as a means of communication among so many different languages. English can provide a common platform for the people of these different languages to communicate. In my view English is easier in comparison to learning other languages. If at all there is a need to learn a second language, English is the only best choice. It can be a powerful second language.

I still have the passion to master the language. I am working on my speaking and hope to acquire the American accent in near future.....